Winter holidays for Rohan, Shipra, Bubbles and Amit take an interesting turn when a brief-case containing plans for a technical breakthrough disappears from Mr. Kapoor's study. His son Rohan and his friends turn detectives. Adding to the excitement, we have the missing engineer, a false address, disguises.

An adventure story set in the Capital.

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A CAPITAL ADVENTURE CBT

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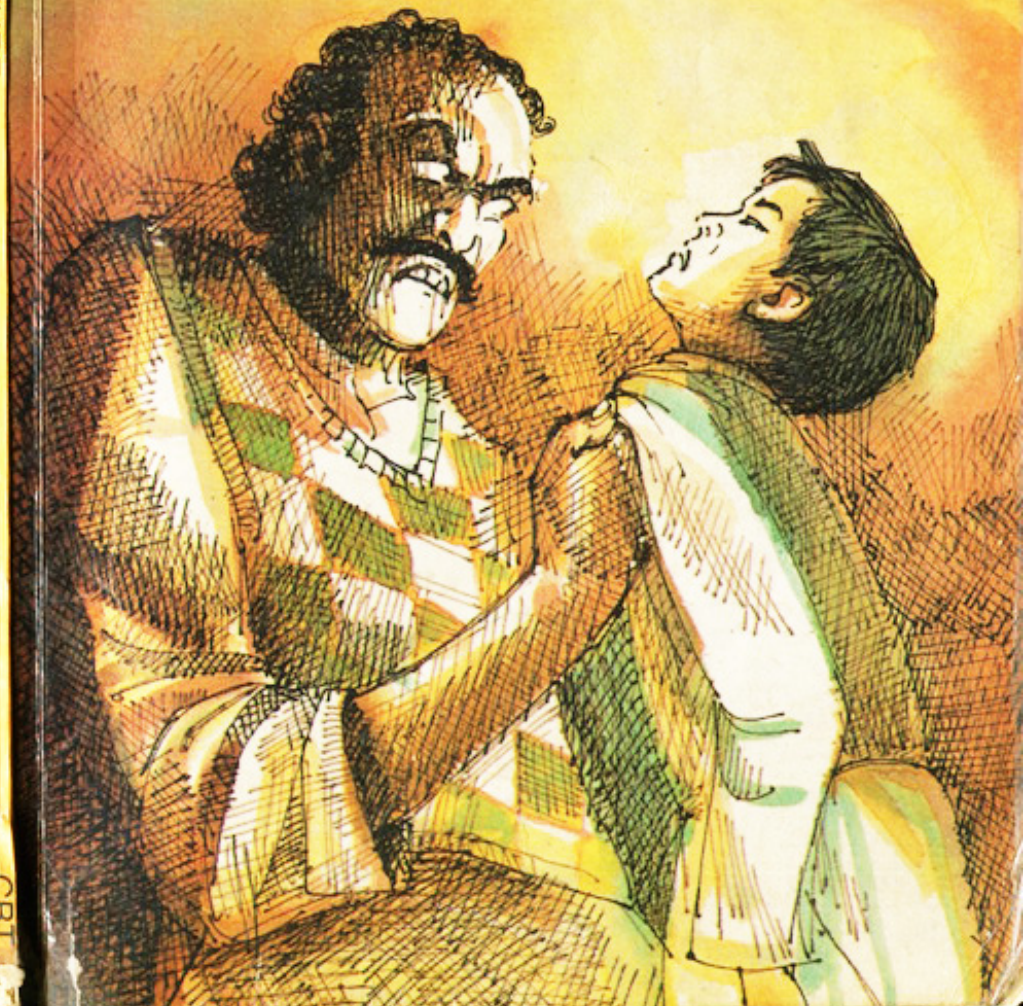
Deepa Agarwal



A CAPITAL ADVENTURE

By Deepa Agarwal

Illustrated by B. G. Varma

Children's Book Trust, New Delhi

Sapna

A Capital Adventure won the second prize in the category of General Fiction in the Competition for Writers of Children's Books held by the Children's Book Trust.

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Holidays

"I am bored," said Shipra, yawning loudly. "I am absolutely, thoroughly *bored.* I just can't wait for school to reopen."

Amit gave her a look of pure astonishment. "You are a strange girl," he said. "I thought you simply hated school. The way you grumble about your homework..."

"Well, it is nice not having loads of homework," Shipra interrupted, "but there is nothing else to do now."

The two of them were sprawled comfortably in Amit's *barsati* (terrace) room, or rather his study, as he liked to call it. Fourteen-year-old Amit, plump and baby-faced, but tall for his age, and twelve-year-old Shipra, slender, with short hair, a style that suited her pert, lively features, were neighbours, staying in one of the newly developed colonies of Delhi.

Shipra's family had moved there two or three months back. Earlier they had lived in a multi-storeyed apartment building. There she had dozens of friends, whom she had really missed when they moved to their new house. The houses were far apart since many had not been built as yet. It was difficult for Shipra to find new friends. Her older sisters, Pooja, seventeen, and Nidhi, fifteen, had little in common with her. Their interests were quite different.

Amit and his family had come to live in the house next door. By a strange coincidence, their mothers turned out to be old friends. So the two families became very close. Amit was an only child and, belonging more or less to the same age group, he and Shipra became good friends.

The *barsati* was their favourite haunt. Amit had persuaded his parents to let him take it over, saying he needed a quiet place to study. Along with his writing desk and a chair, his mother had let him have an old carpet and some cushions. Now it had become a convenient hide-out for the children when they wished to get away from the grown-ups! Unbearably hot in summer, at present the *barsati* was warmed pleasantly by the mild winter sunlight streaming in through the open windows.

"I must say Aunty makes the most delicious chocolate cake," said Shipra, brushing the crumbs off her jeans. The two of them had been enjoying a snack to while away the time.

"My bad luck," Amit said with a rueful grin, looking down at his rather plump figure. He was conscious of being overweight, but not much inclined to do anything about it! He helped himself to another slice of the richly iced cake.

"Amit!" Shipra exclaimed. "That is your fourth piece! You will have to jog an extra round tomorrow."

"Ugh, must you remind me of that?" Amit said with a groan. He hated exercise of any sort. "Let me enjoy my cake at least."

"I give up," Shipra said, exasperated. "You are hopeless."

Amit grinned mischievously. He loved to annoy Shipra, who tended to flare up easily. "By the way," he said casually, "I have an idea. You can help me sell tickets for our school charity show. Since you are so

bored," he added.

"Oh," Shipra wrinkled her nose. "Sell tickets! What a boring thing to do!"

Amit shrugged his shoulders as if to say, "Well, I tried."

For a while they sat quietly. Then Shipra said with a sigh, "Okay, I might as well give it a try. Since there is nothing better to do."

"Shipra, Shipra," someone called out suddenly.

"That sounds like Nidhi," Amit said.

"Don't tell me it is lunch time already," Shipra said. "Gosh! I am so stuffed with cake I won't be able to eat a bite." She sprang to her feet. "I am going, before she shouts the place down."

"Okay then," Amit said. "See you after lunch. We might as well start on our rounds then."

Her mother and sisters were already seated around the dining table.

"Oh, Mummy," Shipra said, looking at the steaming dishes, "I can't eat a thing. I am not hungry."

"Why? What is the matter?" her mother asked, worried, like all mothers, when their children display a poor appetite. "It is a long time since you had your breakfast. Are you feeling all right?"

"I bet she has been stuffing herself at Amit's place," said Pooja. Slightly built and dainty in her ways, Pooja was crazy about clothes and music.

"If you don't watch out, you will soon be as fat as he is," Nidhi said, giggling. She was the brains of the family, though no one could have guessed it from her round, smiling face and her happy-go-lucky manner.

"Not a chance," Shipra said. She was quite used to their teasing. "Anyway, Amit is trying to reduce. He goes jogging with Papa and me these days."

"That is because his mother forces him to," Nidhi said. "Catch him doing it on his own."

"Stop it," said their mother, exasperated. "Shipra, try and eat something. Otherwise you will feel hungry again in a little while."

Shipra gulped down a few mouthfulls quickly. Then she got up. "May I go now?" she asked her mother.

"Whereto?"

"I have promised to sell tickets with Amit. They are having a charity show at his school. I will be back soon."

"All right. But I doubt if you will get many people to buy them. Someone or the other is always coming around selling tickets. People are fed up."

Amit had just finished his lunch when Shipra reached his house.

"Come on, let us go," he said, hastily pushing back his chair. He got his ticket books quickly, and off they went.

"Where should we begin?" asked Amit, as they walked down the road.

It was an uneven and dusty road. Construction material lay about all over the place — stacks of bricks, heaps of gravel and sand. Many of the houses were in a half-finished state which gave an untidy appearance to the colony. What trees there were, were small and straggly, trying to grow amidst onslaughts from stray buffaloes and mischievous urchins.

"Let us start with our immediate neighbours," Shipra said with a twinkle in her eye. "Since they know us, it will be harder for them to refuse!"

"Clever girl!" Amit said, thumping her back approvingly. "Oh! by the way, I have kept five tickets for you all."

"Oh, you are not going to have much of a problem disposing off your tickets," Shipra said, raising her eyebrows, "if you are planning to force them on your friends."

Preferring not to reply, Amit stopped and rang the bell of the first house. A kind-looking lady came out. "Aunty, please, would you help a good cause and buy some tickets for this show..." Amit began his carefully prepared speech.

"All right, all right, I will take two," the lady said quickly, eager to be rid of them.

Amit winked at Shipra, elated. "Was that not quick work?" he said.

"Wait till you get to the next house," Shipra said. "It won't be so easy. That lady is a tough nut. She banged the door on my face the last time I was trying to sell some raffle tickets."

"Then we won't waste time on her," Amit said.

Going from house to house, Amit managed to sell two books of tickets. They had a mixed response. Some people just would not open the door, others refused curtly. An old lady cross-questioned Amit in great detail, then did not buy any tickets! Was he annoyed! But all in all, they were quite satisfied with their efforts. Finally, there was only one house to visit.

"Let us try here and then go home," Shipra said. "It is nearly tea time and I promised Mummy I would be back home soon."

"Okay," Amit said. "I think we have managed to do quite a bit in just one afternoon." He paused, then said, "Wow! What a terrific house."

It really was an impressive house. The outside was finished in pale pink sandstone, and glossy, green creepers climbing up the walls made a delightful contrast. They could catch a glimpse of a velvety lawn through the gate, surrounded by beds of beautiful flowers. There was a sign on the gate which said, "Beware of Dogs".

"Oh-oh," Shipra said. "I don't think we should try to get in there. I don't want some ferocious dogs jumping on me.'

"And taking a juicy bite of your leg," Amit added, with a grin. "I will ring the bell and see. If anyone comes out, we will try our luck." He rang the bell.

Immediately, the dogs began to bark in deep, resounding tones.

"They really sound quite fierce. I am glad we are outside the gate," Shipra said.

After a while, a surly-looking Gurkha came out. "What do you want?" he asked them gruffly.

Amit waved his ticket book. "We are school children," he said. "We want to sell some tickets."

"Go away," said the man in the same gruff tone. "Memsahib is resting. She does not want any tickets."

The children turned away, disappointed.

"What a grouch!" Shipra said. "How did he know memsahib did not want any tickets? He didn't ask her, did he?"

"Never mind," Amit replied. "We have sold quite a few. Tomorrow we can try the houses further ahead."

They turned homeward.

Some exciting news

Shipra's mother opened the door when she got home. "Shipra," she said, with a mysterious smile, "I have got some news for you."

"What is it, Mummy?" Shipra asked eagerly.

"Bubbles is arriving tomorrow. Her grandmother is extremely ill, so your aunt is sending her over to stay. They will be busy at the hospital most of the time and Bubbles will be left all alone at home."

"Yipee! Oh, Mummy, this is too good to be true!" Shipra hugged her mother excitedly. "What fun we are going to have!"

Bubbles was her cousin, a madcap of a girl, the same

age as Shipra. The two of them got on very well. Bubbles studied at a boarding school in the hills, so they could only meet during the holidays. And how Shipra looked forward to meeting Bubbles, who was full of crazy stories about her escapades in school! Sometimes Shipra wished her mother would also send her to a boarding school. They seemed to have so much fun there!

"She can share your room," Shipra's mother said. "You can make some place in your wardrobe for her clothes, and we can have another bed put in."

"How long will she stay?" Shipra asked.

"Well, it depends on how long her grandmother is in hospital. A couple of weeks at least, I think."

"Terrific!" Shipra said enthusiastically. "I will go and tidy up my room at once."

Shipra's room was generally in a terrible mess. Clothes, shoes, books lay scattered about in wild disarray. Her mother valiantly tidied it up each morning. On school days it remained that way till Shipra returned home. Then it went back to its original state. As for holidays — her mother had given up trying to do anything about it then! Bubbles, however, in spite of her crazy ways, was very neat and tidy in her habits. But today, Shipra made a real effort and her room was as neat as a pin when she was through.

Her father was home by that time. After he had his tea, they went down to the market. There they met Amit in one of the shops.

"See you in the morning," Shipra said, "when we go jogging."

Amit made a face. This was one point where Shipra and he definitely disagreed. Jumping out of bed on a cold winter morning and racing around the colony was not his idea of fun!

"Not tomorrow," he said, "we walked around quite

a bit today. I don't think I need the exercise."

"Lazy-bones!" was Shipra's parting comment, as she went off with her father.

But Amit had not reckoned with his mother! The next morning, punctual as ever, she began shaking him awake at six o'clock! "Wake up," she said.

Amit groaned and snuggled deeper into his warm quilt.

"Get up at once," his mother said sternly, "unless you want me to splash cold water on your face."

That sounded most unpleasant just then. So Amit sat up groggily and peered at the clock. "Oh, Mummy," he said, "can't you let me sleep late during the holidays?" It was hard enough to wake up for school at that unearthly hour, he thought, now Shipra and her father had convinced his mother that jogging would be the best way to shed those extra pounds.

"Have you forgotten that you are supposed to go jogging?" she asked.

"No," Amit replied, "I haven't forgotten. I just don't feel like going."

"Now that you are awake, you might as well go."

Then Amit remembered something. "But, Mummy," he said, "I told Shipra that I am not coming today."

"I will go and see," his mother said. "I will ask them to wait for you."

Amit slumped back helplessly on his bed. It was next to impossible for him to get the better of his mother! The same scene was repeated almost every day, still Amit did not give up trying. Reluctantly he got ready. Shipra was waiting by the gate, with her father. Mr. Tandon was a fanatic for fitness, and Shipra shared her father's interest in outdoor activity.

"Guess what," Shipra told Amit as they began to run down the road, "Bubbles is coming to stay."

"Bubbles?" Amit asked. He was already beginning

to puff and pant.

"Have I not told you about my favourite cousin Bubbles, who studies in a boarding school?"

"Oh, yes, yes," Amit said, remembering. "The one and only Bubbles. How could I forget? You have mentioned her hundreds of times."

"Well, today she is coming to stay, bag and baggage. What fun we are going to have!"

'Don't get into too much mischief," her father warned. "Bubbles can be quite a terror."

"Oh, Papa," Shipra pouted. "We are not little kids now. We don't get into mischief."

"Well, Bubbles's ideas of fun can be quite devastating," said her father, remembering earlier visits.

Shipra was about to protest again when Amit interrupted. "Uncle," he asked, "who lives in that house?" They were passing the house they had been turned away from so rudely the day before. The surly Gurkha was coming out of the gate with a pair of Dobermans on leashes.

"What nasty-looking dogs," Shipra said. "I don't like them at all."

"They can be very dangerous," her father said. "This house belongs to a Mr. Kapoor. A wealthy businessman, I believe."

"Whoever he is, he certainly has his house well guarded," Amit said.

"There have been a lot of thefts here lately," Mr. Tandon said, "so one has to take precautions."

Since the colony was not fully developed, security was not so good. There had been a series of rather audacious break-ins, some in the daylight hours. As a result everyone had become extra careful.

Bubbles arrives

Shipra was just finishing breakfast when she heard a car stop outside the gate. 'Bubbles!' she thought, and rushed out. She was right. It was Bubbles. Her father had brought her over.

"Mummy!" Shipra yelled, "Bubbles is here!" Her mother also hurried out to welcome their guest.

Bubbles sprang out of the car and hurled herself at Mrs. Tandon. "*Mausi* (aunt)," she cried, " it is so wonderful to see you again! Shipra! Nidhi! Pooja!" She hugged them all turn by turn.

For a moment the Tandons stood there silent, trying to catch their breaths, quite overwhelmed by this effusive display of affection! Specially since they themselves were not a very demonstrative family.

"Sorry to trouble you with Bubbles," her father said apologetically. "But things are really topsy-turvy at home."

"It is no trouble," Shipra's mother replied. "We have been looking forward to having her over. Specially Shipra. Why don't you come in?"

"No, sorry, I am in a great hurry."

The servant removed Bubbles's luggage from the car. There was an enormous suitcase, a large handbag, she also carried a rather battered teddy bear.

Bubbles hugged her father goodbye, then whirled into the house.

How well her name suits Bubbles, Shipra thought, smiling to herself. She always seemed to be bubbling over with enthusiasm and good spirits. Tall and lanky, much taller than Shipra, though they were the same age, she seemed to be all arms and legs. Her nose looked too big for her face, and masses of unruly curls clustered around it. When she smiled, she exposed teeth bound with metal braces. A new addition was a pair of

glasses which kept sliding down her nose.

"What is this?" Shipra asked, pointing to them.

Bubbles grinned. "I have been studying too hard. Don't I look a real bookworm? I don't have to wear them always, though."

Suddenly, she poked Shipra in the stomach, startling her. She looked around with a conspiratorial air and whispered, "I am quite glad, *Dadiji* (grandmother) fell ill."

"Bubbles!" Shipra was really shocked.

"Oh, you silly!" Bubbles said, highly amused at her expression. "I did not mean it that way. I only meant that I wouldn't have been able to stay with you otherwise. Is this not fun? I would have been stuck at home with everyone saying ,'Do this! Do that! Sit still! Don't talk too much!' Can you imagine, *Dadiji* expects me to spend the holidays doing needlework and knitting, yech!"

Shipra laughed heartily. She knew Bubbles hated sewing, a skill her grandmother considered indispensable for a girl. She had often gone into fits of laughter at Bubbles's descriptions of her needlework teacher scolding her and insisting her fingers were all thumbs!

Bubbles emptied the contents of her suitcase on the bed and proceeded to put her things away.

Shipra picked up the battered old teddy bear. "Do they allow you to keep old Pinky around in school?" she asked.

"Of course, they do. I told matron that I couldn't live without Pinky."

Though Bubbles no longer went to sleep clutching the old teddy bear, as she had done when she was much younger, she still liked to have it around. Originally it had been pink, hence the name. But now with age and repeated washings it had turned a nondescript grey and looked quite disreputable, with a torn ear and a missing

eye. Still Bubbles could not bear to discard her favourite childhood toy, even at, what she considered, the mature age of twelve.

"So, what have you been up to?" Shipra asked, knowing Bubbles would be spilling over with interesting tales.

"Gosh, I really got into trouble this time," Bubbles began. She launched into an enthralling description of escapades which almost invariably seemed to end in disaster!

She was talking about a moonlight, midnight feast, which had been exposed by a girl who had not been invited, when a soft voice called, "*Didi* (elder sister)!"

"Who is that?" Bubbles asked, pushing up her glasses.

A small girl stood in the doorway, clinging to it shyly. Dressed in a shabby frock several sizes too large for her, her brown streaked hair tied in a tight, oily plait, she was nevertheless, clean and pleasant looking.

"Oh, Mohini," Shipra said, suddenly remembering something, "did you practise those words? She is the maidservant's daughter," she explained to Bubbles.

The little girl shook her head sadly.

"I am trying to teach her," Shipra said. "Her mother refuses to send her to school, though her brother goes. She says it is no use, that she does not need to know how to read and write."

"How mean!" Bubbles was really indignant at the idea.

"Why didn't you practise?" Shipra asked Mohini. The girl stood there tongue-tied. She was familiar with Shipra but felt a little shy of Bubbles. Shipra understood — she must not have got the time. Though she was hardly eleven, Mohini helped her mother to cook at home, fetched water from the community tap and looked after her younger brothers and sisters. She

hardly had any time to play. Besides, she went with her mother from house to house helping her to wash dishes and scrub floors.

Shipra got up and took out an old exercise book and a pencil. She wrote out a line of words in Hindi. "Here," she said, "practise these out here."

Mohini sat on the floor and began to write laboriously. Barely ten minutes had passed when a thin, untidy woman with a sour expression on her face came and stood at the door, hands on hips.

"So! you are here!" she said angrily. "There I am slogging away and this maharani is comfortably sitting out here."

"I asked her to sit here," Shipra said coldly. She did not like Mohini's mother, Kalyani, who scolded the little girl all the time, and even beat her frequently.

"*Bahenji* (sister), you should let her do her work," Kalyani said. "All this reading, writing is of no use to her. She has to scrub dishes all her life."

Bubbles could not stand it any longer. "You are a stupid woman," she burst out. "Don't you realise that if she is educated, she can do something better? You want her to remain ignorant and slave for others all her life."

The woman was really startled. She had not expected such a strong reaction. She folded her hands and said in a whining tone, "Forgive me, *bahenji*. It is all right for you rich people to learn how to read and write. What use is it to a poor girl?"

"All right, all right," Shipra said irritably, wanting to get rid of the woman. "She is just coming."

Kalyani went off, muttering to herself. Mohini looked terrified.

"*Didi,*" she said, "I think I should go."

"No, you stay here," Bubbles said, "and finish your work."

"I have finished," Mohini said, holding out the exercise book.

Bubbles peeped over Shipra's shoulder. The words had been neatly copied out.

"Now read them out," Shipra said.

Mohini spelt out the words, hesitating a bit here and there.

"Very good," Shipra said. "You hardly made any mistake. Tomorrow I will teach you some more."

"*Shabash* (well done)!" Bubbles added. "Keep it up."

Mohini giggled shyly, then ran off. Shipra and Bubbles smiled at each other.

Suddenly, Shipra's mother called out, "Shipra, Amit is here," and he appeared at the door.

Shipra's hand flew to her mouth. "Oh," she said, "I forgot. I was supposed to go selling tickets just now. Sorry, Amit," she said, contrite.

"Well, I waited and waited," Amit said. "Then I thought I would come and check up."

"Oh, meet my cousin Bubbles. I told you she was coming today."

"Hi," Amit said. "Pleased to meet you." Turning to Shipra, "Of course, you told me in the morning. I should have remembered when you did not turn up. Okay, girls, I will push off now."

"Hey, wait a minute," Shipra cried. "We are also coming. Coming, Bubbles — to sell tickets?" She did not want Amit to feel she had ditched him just because her cousin had come.

"Sell tickets?" Bubbles asked, not understanding what it was all about.

"Our school is having a charity show, so we are going around selling tickets. Shipra is helping me," Amit explained. He grinned and added, "You see people are more kindly disposed towards girls."

"What nonsense!" Shipra said. "Amit talks so persuasively that people just can't say no."

Bubbles laughed. "I have never done anything like this," she said. "Sounds fun."

She got up quickly, ran a comb through her hair and then looked critically in the mirror at her grey jeans and maroon pullover.

"Oh, Bubbles," Shipra said, laughing, "you look fine."

Shipra was never really bothered about her clothes, any old thing would do, as long as it was wearable. But Bubbles was rather fussy.

"Okay, let us go," she said, satisfied.

The three of them set off down the road.

"Do you want to try again at that house, where the *chowkidar* (guard) shooed us off?" Shipra asked.

"No way," Amit said emphatically. "Bad luck for them. They will have to miss the charity show."

Accident

They were walking along the road, quite engrossed in conversation, when it happened. Amit and Shipra were listening to Bubbles, who was as usual chattering away, nineteen to the dozen. Suddenly, a boy came whizzing along on a racing bike.

"Watch out!" Amit tried to pull Shipra away. She was directly in the boy's path, and he was going too fast to brake in time.

But Amit was not quick enough. Slam! The bike ran straight into Shipra, and she fell down hard.

"Oh, no!" Bubbles cried. Both she and Amit rushed to pick up Shipra. She got up shakily.

"Are you hurt?" Bubbles asked, concerned.

"I – I just grazed my elbow a bit," Shipra said,

biting her lip.

But both of them could see it was a bad gash. She had fallen on a sharp stone and it had cut quite deep into her elbow.

"Careless fool!" Amit said furiously.

"There he comes," said Bubbles. "Wait and see, I will give him a piece of my mind!"

The boy had stopped his bike a little further down the road. He came along with a sheepish look on his face.

"Can't you see where you are going?" Amit asked him aggressively. "What did you think you were up to, knocking her down like that?"

"I am very sorry," the boy said, his face redder than a tomato. "I was going too fast and just could not swerve aside in time."

"Look, mister," Bubbles said in her most sarcastic tones, "this is not the place to train for the Olympics. She could have been badly hurt. You should be more careful. The road belongs to everyone, not to you alone!"

The boy turned an even deeper shade of red. "I am really very sorry," he said again. "It was really very careless of me. I hope you are not hurt," he turned to Shipra.

"I am okay," Shipra said. "It is just a scratch." The boy was looking so ashamed of himself that she began to feel sorry for him.

"Why don't you come over to my place and have it attended to?"

"Oh, it is nothing," Shipra said. She hated to make a fuss. "I can easily go home if I feel it needs attention."

"But my house is just here," the boy said. "Why don't you all come over for a minute?"

Then Amit got a bright idea. This was a wonderful

opportunity to sell some tickets! The boy could hardly refuse, he thought.

"Where is your house?" he asked.

"Just there," the boy pointed to the large house Shipra and Amit had visited the day before.

Amit's mind was made up. This was too good a chance to be missed!

"Come along, Shipra," he said, "you might as well get your arm attended to."

Shipra followed the others reluctantly, though her arm was paining.

"What is your name?" Bubbles asked. She too, had cooled down. The boy's apologetic behaviour had mollified her.

"Rohan," he replied. He was quite a pleasant looking boy, though he seemed quite shy. Dressed in a dark blue pullover and grey corduroy pants, he was almost as tall as Amit but much slimmer, of course. His eyes crinkled up when he smiled—as he did now for the first time.

"I am Amit Verma," Amit introduced himself. "This is Shipra, my neighbour, whom you just knocked down, and her cousin Bubbles."

Rohan's face clouded up again. Shipra gave Amit an angry look. She wished he would not keep harping on the subject. Maybe Amit realised that too, because he said, "Hey, don't mind what I said just now. I was only trying to be funny as usual, and failing to amuse—as usual." He glanced pointedly at Shipra's frowning face!

Rohan opened the gate and stood aside to let them pass. The dogs started barking loudly as soon as they entered.

"I hope the saying is true," Amit said, "that a barking dog seldom bites."

"Don't worry," Rohan said. "They are tied up at

the back. In any case I am here with you."

At that moment the door opened and the surly Gurkha came out. At first, he did not recognise the children, then he had a second look and his mouth fell open in surprise. Shipra had to suppress a laugh.

They were ushered into a large drawing room—very luxuriously furnished with deep, ornately carved sofas upholstered in silk and velvet, expensive carpets and valuable looking ornaments placed here and there.

"Please sit down," Rohan said. "I will come in a minute."

An old *ayah* (maid) with a kindly face came with some antiseptic and cotton and cleaned Shipra's wound and bandaged it. Then a servant appeared carrying a tray of cold drinks. Shipra fidgeted, feeling a lot of fuss was being made over nothing.

"You know," Amit said conversationally to Rohan, "yesterday we came here to sell tickets and your *chowkidar* chased us off."

Rohan looked bewildered. "I did not know," he said. "Bhim Bahadur has this habit of overprotecting us. He is as bad as the dogs. What tickets were you selling?"

"We are having a charity show in school and we are supposed to sell as many tickets as we can during the holidays," Amit said. He produced his ticket book. "Would you like to buy some?"

"Okay," Rohan said. "I will take one book. Let me get the money."

Amit's eyes opened wide. He had not expected such a generous response.

"Look," he said, "you don't have to buy so many tickets. Two or three will do."

Rohan smiled. "Believe me, I can use all the tickets." He got up and left the room.

Shipra and Bubbles gave Amit scathing looks. He tried to look repentant, unsuccessfully. So he shrugged his shoulders helplessly.

"Gosh, this place is quite overpowering," Bubbles whispered to Shipra. "I don't even feel like talking!"

"I know," Shipra agreed. "Give me Amit's *barsati* any time."

Rohan came back with the money.

"Thanks," Amit said, giving him the tickets. They got up to go. "Okay, see you around sometime."

"Thanks, Rohan," Shipra and Bubbles chorused. Their formal surroundings made them feel they should be on their best behaviour!

"Why don't you all uh – stay a little while longer?" Rohan asked hesitantly.

"We would love to," Bubbles said, "but Amit has to sell some more tickets." For some reason she suddenly felt a bit sorry for Rohan. He appeared so eager for their company. 'I don't think he has many friends,' she thought.

As though reading her thoughts, Amit said, "Why don't you come over to my place in the evening? I stay quite close. Shipra lives just next door. That is, if you are not doing anything else." He gave Rohan his address.

Rohan's face brightened. "I would like to," he said. "Thanks, I will definitely come. Sorry again – about the accident," he said to Shipra.

"Forget it," Shipra said. "It was nothing. I have had worse knocks."

They all trooped out of the gate. Amit glanced at his watch. "I think we can try a couple of houses before lunch."

"I think he is a very nice boy," Bubbles said, as they walked away, "even though he was careless. But he looks rather lonely."

"Amit," Shipra said, "it was rather mean of you to go after him like that. It was my fault, too, for not looking where I was going."

"He should not have been racing along like that," Amit said. "Anyway," he said, with a mischievous grin, "I managed to unload some tickets."

"You really took advantage of him," Shipra said indignantly. "Poor Rohan, he felt so guilty that he tried to make up for it by buying a whole book."

"I didn't ask him to buy a whole book," Amit said defensively. "Anyway, he can jolly well afford it."

"That is not the point," Bubbles said.

"Oh, let us forget the whole thing," Shipra said getting fed up with the discussion.

Looking rather sulky, Amit rang the bell of the next house. But a servant answered the door and said there was no one at home. Half-heartedly they sauntered to the following house, where an irritable old gentleman, who seemed to be allergic to children, told them to get lost in no uncertain terms.

"Come on, let us go home now," Bubbles said. "It must be lunch time – I am starving."

A mysterious theft

Bubbles had guessed right. Rohan was a very lonely boy. His parents hardly had any time for him. His father was preoccupied with his business affairs, and his mother was equally involved in her round of social activities, coffee parties and card sessions to pay much attention to him. They felt that Rohan did not lack anything because they could provide him with everything that money could buy. From childhood he had had all the luxuries, all the expensive gadgets and toys available. But he had missed out on the warmth

and affection of a close family life and felt it keenly.

School days were not too bad. There was plenty to do and he was quite busy. Also, he was very attached to his elder sister. But now she was away on a trip with her college friends and he was all alone at home. He spent most of his time watching movies on the video, or riding around aimlessly on his bicycle. There were no children living in the houses nearby with whom he could be friends. So he felt the lack of company acutely, like Shipra had in the beginning.

The chance encounter with Shipra, Bubbles and Amit was a godsend for him, even though it began so badly! He wanted them to stay on chatting, eager as he was to have some friends. So when Amit had asked him to go over in the evening, he was quite excited.

Shipra was watering the plants in the garden when Rohan arrived. She was quite fond of gardening. Bubbles was with her too, chattering away as usual.

Rohan stood at Amit's gate somewhat hesitantly. He had not noticed the girls next door but they had seen him cycling up.

"Hi!" Bubbles cried, peering over the wall.

"Hello, Rohan," said Shipra, too. "A – mit!" she yelled. Since the two houses were side by side, it was easy for them to call out to each other.

Amit appeared on the balcony. "Oh, hello," he said. "Why don't you all come up?"

Shipra shut the tap, rolled up the hose, kept it aside, and dried her hands on her jeans, to Bubbles' utter disapproval.

"Don't you have a hankie?" she asked.

"I had one," Shipra said, "but it seems to have vanished. Anyway, it hardly matters. Come on."

She led the way to the *barsati*, where Amit was waiting for them.

"Oh, isn't this cosy!" Bubbles said.

"Anyone interested in scrabble?" Amit asked.

"Me, definitely," Bubbles said enthusiastically. "I am the school champ. Well, unofficial," she added hastily.

"I am not too bad either," Rohan said, shyly.

One game of scrabble put an end to his shyness. With Bubbles's endless chatter and Amit's pjs (poor jokes), as Shipra insisted on calling them, he really opened up and enjoyed himself.

"Listen," Shipra said, "we have got several holidays left. Why don't we do something, instead of just sitting around?"

"Yes, let us!" Bubbles said eagerly. "Go for a picnic or something."

"Where should we go?" Amit asked, "Surajkund, Sultanpur lake..."

"Oh, we have been there so many times," Shipra said, wrinkling her nose.

"Can we go to Qutab Minar?" Rohan asked hesitantly as though not sure his suggestion would be considered. "I have never really seen it properly."

"Never seen it properly!" They all turned on him incredulously.

"Then you really must," Amit said. "Imagine living in Delhi and never having seen the Qutab Minar!"

"If we go on a weekday," Shipra said, "there won't be much of a crowd, so it won't be too bad."

"But how are we planning to go on a weekday? Our parents won't be free then," Amit said.

"I think I can arrange that," Rohan said. "I will ask my Dad to let us have a car and a driver."

"Oh, could you?" Bubbles's eyes shone with excitement. "Won't that be fun, going all by ourselves!"

"So, when shall we go?" asked Shipra. "Let us fix the day so that we can ask our parents. Not tomorrow, Bubbles, because we are going with Mummy to the

hospital to visit your grandma."

"Hmmm, today is Monday," Amit said, "Tuesday is out, Wednesday... what about Friday? That will give us time to plan properly."

"Fine," Rohan said, "Friday it is."

"That is pukka, then," Bubbles said. "Oh," she jumped up excitedly, "I wish we were going tomorrow. I just can't wait till Friday."

The others laughed, but they were just as excited as Bubbles. It was getting late, so the group broke up, with plans to meet again the next day.

Tuesday turned out to be a gloomy day. The sky was overcast and a dense fog hung over the city. But Bubbles was keen to visit her grandmother, specially because she would be able to meet her parents at the hospital, too.

"Dress warmly, girls," Shipra's mother said. "It is going to be a cold day."

They bundled up well in their warmest woollens. It was a long jerky ride to the hospital in the three-wheeler scooter and they were glad when they arrived. Bubbles's grandmother was not too well and the doctors had advised an operation. But she was pleased to see Bubbles, and so were her parents.

On their way back, Shipra's mother decided to do some shopping. The fog had melted away a bit and a weak sun struggled to shine out of the grey sky. Still, it was quite pleasant to be outside among the throng of busy shoppers.

"Now, girls," Shipra's mother said, when she had bought all she wanted, "how about some pizzas?"

"Just what I was longing for!" Bubbles cried, absolutely thrilled. "*Mausi*, you are great!" She loved outings like this, more so because she was in the boarding school most of the year.

The pizzas and the sundaes which followed, were a

real treat. It was almost evening by the time they got home, tired, but having enjoyed their day.

As soon as they arrived, Nidhi said, "Amit came over a couple of times. He was quite keen to tell you both something." She and Pooja had spent the day at home.

Bubbles raised her eyebrows questioningly.

"It might be about the picnic," Shipra said. "We will talk to him in a little while. Maybe Rohan came over and told him something."

"Who is Rohan?" Pooja asked.

"The boy who bumped into Shipra yesterday." Shipra's mother had been quite worried when she had returned home with her arm bandaged the day before. They had managed to reassure her, though, that Shipra was not badly hurt. But everyone had heard about the incident in great detail from Bubbles.

"Hey, listen," Nidhi said, "was there not a theft at his house last night?"

"A theft! What theft?" Both Shipra and Bubbles exclaimed together.

"Oh, you all didn't hear about it. You had already left. Kalyani said there had been a burglary at the big house in the next lane."

"A burglary! Gosh, and we didn't even come to know! What all did they steal?" Shipra asked, breathless with curiosity.

"Nothing much, I believe, surprisingly," Nidhi said. "At least that is what I heard."

"I am sure that is what Amit wanted to tell us," Bubbles said excitedly. "Let us go and ask him about it."

But before they could get up to go, the bell rang. And it turned out to be Amit.

"Amit! What happened at Rohan's house?" Shipra could not wait to know.

"A robbery!" Amit seemed ready to burst with excitement. "Can you imagine, with all those dogs and the *chowkidar* and everything, some thieves broke in!"

"But when did it happen?" Bubbles asked.

"Last night. Someone broke the window panes of the study, which is on the first floor and got in. But the strange thing is that the only thing they stole was a brief-case."

"How odd!" Shipra said. "I thought there was plenty worth stealing in that house."

"Maybe someone alarmed them," Mrs. Tandon said, "and they left with what they could get hold of."

"I visited the scene of the crime," Amit said importantly. "You girls really missed something. The police were there, investigating with dogs and everything."

"Well, I am glad nothing more than a brief-case was stolen," Bubbles said. "But listen, what happened to their dogs? Did they not bark at all? They make such a racket when anyone approaches the house."

"That is another peculiar thing," Amit said. "The dogs did not bark at all."

"I can't believe it," Shipra said.

"It is true," Amit insisted. "Rohan told me the whole story."

"Oh!" Bubbles said. "I wish we could go and talk to Rohan, too!"

"It is late," said Mrs. Tandon, overhearing.

"Tomorrow morning," Amit said. "We will go and find out if they have discovered anything about the thieves."

The robbery was a hot topic of discussion the rest of the evening.

"This colony is really unsafe," Shipra's mother said worriedly. "There have been so many thefts lately."

"Still they will find something or the other to steal, I am sure. I won't be able to sleep a wink all night."

But Shipra and Bubbles had no such problem. "I don't think any robbers are going to keep me awake tonight," Shipra said, as she slipped into her *razai* (quilt), yawning loudly.

"Same here," Bubbles said, as she brushed her hair. "But I do hope I don't dream about them!"

The only reply was a gentle snore. Shipra was already fast asleep!

More about the robbery

Shipra slept so soundly that she did not even get up in time for her morning run. But she and Bubbles got ready and gulped down their breakfast as fast as they could and rushed to Amit's house to call him.

"I bet that lazy fellow is still in his night-dress," Shipra said.

But Amit surprised them. He was ready and waiting for them. The three of them walked briskly to Rohan's house. All the way there they could not help talking about the strange robbery.

A peculiar atmosphere hung over Rohan's house. Bhim Bahadur let them in, grumpily as usual; the dogs barked as loud as ever.

"What were they doing day before yesterday night?" Bubbles whispered to Shipra.

Rohan looked pleased to see them.

"Hi! Rohan," they said.

"Sorry to hear about the robbery," Shipra added.

"Yeah," he said with a sigh, "it was quite a shock. We just can't understand how it happened."

"Where did it all take place?" Shipra asked, trying

not to sound too eager. "Come along this way," Rohan said. "I will show you."

He led them up a flight of polished marble stairs, down a long passage to a room which had windows overlooking the driveway. It was furnished like an office. There was a large writing desk with a typewriter, penstands, blotters, and some filing cabinets on one side.

"My Dad's office," Rohan said. "When he brings work home, that is. See," he said pointing to the window, "they got in from there!"

The children stared at the window. Its wide panes had been neatly cut out to make an opening large enough for a man to get in. What was even more startling was that the stout looking grills had also been unscrewed and deposited inside the room.

"A real professional job," Amit remarked.

"It must have taken them quite some time to do all this," Shipra said.

"Hmmm, but how is it that the dogs didn't bark at all?" Bubbles asked.

"That is the real mystery," Rohan said, shaking his head. "They slept through it all."

"Drugged!" Amit said. "I bet the thieves drugged them, before entering the house."

"Or maybe it was someone they knew," Bubbles said.

"What about your *chowkidar?*" Shipra asked. She had taken a dislike to the man and felt he could well be the villain of the piece. "What was he doing when all this was going on?" she asked suspiciously. "Doesn't he stay up at night?"

"He does," Rohan said. "But he too didn't hear any unusual sounds. He says that some time around one o'clock, two drunk men were quarrelling on the road, so he went out to tell them to move on and not create a

disturbance here. He says it took him quite some time to persuade them to go away."

"Sounds rather fishy to me," Amit said. "It could have been done deliberately to draw his attention away."

"Exactly," Shipra agreed. "Or he could be involved, and is making up the whole story. Nobody else saw the drunk men, did they? That would explain why the dogs did not bark at all. What did the police have to say?"

"I can't believe that Bhim Bahadur is involved," Rohan said at once. "He has been with us for so long, and is very loyal. The police feel it could be the work of a gang which has been involved in several robberies lately around here. They probably drugged the dogs, they say. They questioned the *chowkidar* too, and took fingerprints from the room. They had brought their dogs, but they could only follow the trail up to the back wall and then to the road. The thieves must have made off in a vehicle, they said."

"And nothing but a brief-case was stolen?" Bubbles asked, astonishment evident in her voice.

"No," Rohan said briefly, "but there were very important documents in it."

"Oh...hh!" Shipra and Bubbles glanced meaningfully at each other, their curiosity heightened by this disclosure. But Rohan did not seem inclined to say anything about it.

"How do you think they climbed up?" Amit asked, peering out of the window.

There did not seem any convenient way to climb up. There were no pipes or any kind of foothold along the smooth, stone wall. There was, however, a ledge running along the side of the window. A man could very well stand there for some time — somewhat precariously, though.

"They must have left some footprints on the wall!" Bubbles said.

"The police looked for them," Rohan said. "Strangely enough, they did not find any! They were equally foxed as to how the thieves climbed up!"

"Flew up," Amit said with a grin. "Seriously, they must have left some traces when they climbed up. Come on, let us see for ourselves. Maybe the police missed out on something."

He turned and the others followed him out of the room. Shipra was the last. As she left, she stumbled on a corner of the carpet.

"Uhh!" she exclaimed in annoyance, clutching the desk to keep herself from falling. It was then that she noticed a glint in the corner, near the wastepaper basket. She bent down to have a closer look. It was a metal button, the type generally used on coats. She picked it up. Perhaps one of the thieves had dropped it, Shipra thought excitedly, and rushed out of the room to show it to the others.

She quickly caught up with the others and was about to tell them about the button, when she saw two men coming up the stairs — a well-dressed, grey-haired gentleman with a serious look on his face and a younger man with a sharp, rat-like face, a long nose and beady eyes.

"Showing your friends around?" the older man enquired of Rohan, smiling at them, though he looked worried and tense. 'It is Rohan's father!' Shipra thought. 'They have the same smile.'

"I hope they haven't disturbed anything," the other man said in an irritating, high-pitched voice. Shipra almost mentioned the button, but the man's condescending tone annoyed her. He seemed to imply that they were a meddlesome nuisance. The button might not have anything to do with the theft at all, she thought.

"My father is employing a private detective," Rohan explained, as they clattered down the stairs.

"Was that him? I hope they haven't disturbed anything," Bubbles imitated his nasal tone perfectly. They all burst out laughing. The man had certainly rubbed them the wrong way.

To their disappointment, they could not find a single sign to show that anyone had climbed the wall. Not even the suspicion of a footprint, or a mark of any kind. The lush, green monstera creeper, growing just below the window, looked untouched, its glossy leaves absolutely intact.

"Strange!" Amit said, turning away. He just could not figure it out.

"The police were equally stumped," Rohan said consolingly.

Shipra gazed up at the window, wondering how the thief could have climbed up without leaving any signs. She noticed a wide sunshade above it, then the wall stretched upwards, ending in a parapet along the terrace. An idea flashed through her mind.

"Maybe . . . maybe," she said, "he jumped down from the top!"

"Jumped down from the top!" Amit said in a scoffing tone. "What a crazy idea! Why would he? He would have to go up to the terrace first, which would only make it more complicated for him."

"Well, I think it is possible," Shipra said. "He certainly doesn't seem to have climbed up from below."

"Why don't we go up to the terrace and see?" Rohan said. "The idea is worth exploring."

They ran up the stairs again. Rohan unbolted the door leading to the terrace. It was a big, open terrace. There was a small room and a toilet at one end — which was hardly ever used, Rohan said. At the other end, there was a terrace garden of sorts, a number of

plants in large cement pots, a variety of palms, colourful bougainvillaea in full bloom and even some lovely roses.

"This spot should be just above the study window," Rohan said, pointing to the right, after looking around thoughtfully.

They all turned eagerly in that direction.

"Look!" Bubbles cried, "cigarette stubs!"

She was right! There were a few, rather fresh cigarette stubs lying on the ground.

Amit picked up one gingerly with his handkerchief, as he had seen a detective do in a movie. "Evidence!" he said, a wide grin splitting his face.

The others just stared at the stub.

"This means someone was here," Bubbles said. "Could anyone have come up here for something?" she asked Rohan.

"I don't think so," Rohan said. "Hardly anyone comes up here, except to clean up or water the plants. Can you make out the brand?" he asked Amit.

Amit peered hard at the stub but could not make out anything. There were some more stubs lying around. He picked those up too, but could not make out anything on those either.

Shipra leaned over the parapet to see if there were any footprints on the sunshade, but it was too far below to see anything. "It would be quite easy for a man to jump onto the sunshade from here," she said. "Then from the sunshade he could lower himself onto the ledge!"

"But why would he do that?" Rohan said, frowning. "He would have to come up to the terrace first, which would not be an easy task. This door is the only way to the terrace. It is not even attached to the adjoining house, if the thief wanted to come that way." He stopped and thought for a minute. "Unless . . . unless

somebody came into the house earlier in the night and sneaked up to the terrace and waited."

"Yes!" Shipra said excitedly. "That is exactly what must have happened. He must have been waiting for an opportune moment — that is why there are so many cigarette stubs!"

"I still don't get it," Amit said, shaking his head. "Wouldn't it have been easier to climb up to the window, instead of coming here first and facing the risk of being discovered in between?"

"But remember the dogs," Bubbles said. "This way he could avoid them."

"I am sure the dogs would have sensed an intruder. Besides, even if he came in earlier, they would have barked," Amit replied, unconvinced.

From the terrace, they saw Mr. Kapoor come out of the house with the detective. They were deep in conversation. Then Mr. Kapoor got into his car and the detective got onto a two-wheeler scooter and both drove away.

A secret disclosed

"Come on, let us go down to my room and talk about this," Rohan said suddenly.

They followed Rohan down to his room, which was on the first floor, like the study.

It was a pleasant room, large, airy and attractively furnished. A big wall unit covered one wall, filled with books, an expensive music system, and other knick-knacks. A collection of posters filled the other wall and a study table stood in one corner. Marvellously neat for a boy's room, thought Shipra, remembering her own generally untidy room.

Amit immediately plonked down on a large floor

cushion, while Shipra and Bubbles made themselves comfortable on a low settee.

But something was bothering Bubbles — something she had been simply dying to ask all the while. Finally she just could not control her curiosity any longer! "By the way," she asked, trying to sound very casual, "were those papers very important — the ones in the missing brief-case?"

Rohan did not reply immediately. He closed the door, sat down on the edge of his bed and examined his nails for a minute. Then lowering his voice, he said, "Actually, I am not supposed to tell anyone. But if you all promise to keep it an absolute secret..."

"We promise! We promise!" was the instant reply.

"You know," Rohan said in the same hushed tone, "my father manufactures machinery. Well, he had developed a new type of printing machine — something as good as certain machines which were being imported till now, but much cheaper. So you see, this machine had tremendous potential. The plans for this machine were in the brief-case!"

"Oh, my god!" Bubbles's eyes were as big as saucers behind her glasses.

"My father feels," Rohan continued, "that a rival manufacturer has had the plans stolen. He wants them back at any cost. That is why the private detective."

"No wonder the thief went straight to the study, instead of the bedrooms," Shipra said. "But why all his secrecy? Do the police know the plans were in the brief-case?"

"Actually," Rohan said, "these plans were being developed in complete secrecy. Only my father and the engineer designing the machine knew. They didn't want any of his rivals to get a hint that they were coming out with this machine. Now that they are missing, he doesn't want people to know either, in case they try

to get hold of them. He has told the police that there were some important papers and cash in the brief-case. It is possible, he says, that it may be an ordinary thief, who thought there was some cash in the brief-case."

"But if the thief was only after the plans, how did he know where exactly they were? Someone must have told him," Shipra said.

"That means someone else did know about the plans," Amit broke in vehemently. "Someone besides your father and the engineer. But why didn't your father lock up the plans in a safe if they were that important?"

"He does! Usually," Rohan said. "As soon as he gets home he locks them away safely. But that day, some visitors dropped in as soon as he came home. They stayed on for quite some time, in fact they had dinner, so it just slipped his mind."

"The thief could have broken into the safe, too, if he were after the plans," Bubbles said. "Do you think the engineer could be involved in this? After all it seems strange that no one knew about them and yet they were stolen. He might have sold them to a rival manufacturer."

"We — ll," Rohan said slowly, "I don't think so. He had access to the plans all the time. He could have pretended to misplace them."

"But that would have caused suspicion to fall on him, specially if the plans surfaced elsewhere," Bubbles said heatedly. "I think he had an accomplice steal the plans so that he would make money by selling them to someone else."

"It could be possible," Rohan admitted reluctantly, "though my father paid him pretty well. He was even getting a special bonus for this design, but still, you never know."

"But how did the thief know the plans would be in

the brief-case and not in the safe?" Shipra said, frowning thoughtfully.

"Must have been taking a chance," Amit said. "Might have intended to crack the safe if they were not in the brief-case, as Bubbles said. Did anyone else know the brief-case was in the study? Some of the servants may have seen it there."

"Oh, yeah, the driver, I completely forgot about him," Rohan said. "He put the brief-case in there, when Dad came home."

"So he too knew," Bubbles said. "But he didn't know the plans were in there."

"Naturally not," Rohan said. "In any case, he carries the brief-case in practically everyday."

"Still," Amit said, "he might have known something. Those stubs, I feel, might give us a clue. If only we could make out the brand."

Shipra suddenly remembered the button she had found. "Listen, I too have a clue," she said. "I found this in the study!"

Rohan looked at the brass button and smiled a little. "You know," he said hesitantly, not wanting to disappoint Shipra, "it looks like the ones on my school blazer. Could be mine, I think one is missing. I will check up and let you know."

"Oh, well," Shipra said with a rueful smile, "you know, I almost gave it to that detective. But he seemed such a grumpy fellow, so I didn't."

"Oh, the detective," Amit said. "He looks a real nasty type. Let us see what all he manages to discover."

"You should have got someone like Karamchand," Bubbles piped up enthusiastically. She was really fond of the TV serial.

"Maybe he should start eating carrots," Amit said with a laugh. "Seriously, is he supposed to be any good?"

"Well, he belongs to some agency called Spywell. Somebody recommended them to Dad," Rohan said.

"I bet we could do a pretty good job ourselves," Bubbles said. "See how we discovered those cigarette stubs. You know, once we tracked down a girl who stole chocolates in school."

"You know, Bubbles," Amit said slowly, "that is a terrific idea. We have even got two suspects."

"And some clues," Shipra added.

"Enough to start with," Rohan said. "We could help Dad out. He is really worried."

"So what should we do first?" Bubbles asked. "Check up on the engineer, I think. Trace his activities, find out whom he meets. Do you know where he lives?"

"No, but I will find out," Rohan said. "I do know that he lives in this very colony. Sometimes he comes over in the evening to discuss something with Dad. The driver probably knows, he has dropped him home a couple of times."

"Don't ask him!" Bubbles exclaimed at once. "Remember, he is a suspect, too. He might wonder why you are asking."

"I will think of a good excuse."

"I doubt if both of them are involved together," Shipra said. "When will you find out his address?" She was eager to get started.

"Not before evening," Rohan said. "But as soon as I do, I will let you know."

"Do you think we ought to hand over these stubs to the police?" Shipra asked. "They might be able to fingerprint them and discover the culprit."

"Hmmm," Amit said. He was reluctant to part with his precious clues. "We will discuss all this in the evening. I think we had better go home now."

"Okay, see you in the evening," Rohan said.

But Rohan did not turn up in the evening as he had

promised. The others waited for long. "What a bore," Bubbles said, pulling a long face. "We should have taken his phone number. At least we could have rung him up."

"We had better do that the first thing tomorrow," Shipra said. "Maybe he has gone to check up on the engineer."

"All by himself?" Bubbles asked, dismayed at the idea. "Oh, I hope he didn't do that. I would have liked to go along too."

"Well, I can't imagine why he hasn't come," Shipra said.

Bubbles's parents dropped in unexpectedly, a little later in the evening. It was a short visit, because they had to go back to the hospital. Her grandmother was to be operated upon the next day.

The fact that Rohan did not come sharpened the others' curiosity even more. Bubbles and Shipra stayed up quite late that night, talking.

Shipra did get up to go jogging the next morning but with great difficulty. Bubbles had refused, quite firmly, to be drawn into any such activity. Amit went, though reluctantly as usual.

Some detective work

After breakfast the next day, they all hurried over to Rohan's house, anxious to know the latest.

"Why didn't you come yesterday?" Bubbles burst out, as soon as they met him.

"Sorry," Rohan said. "Some relatives came over and I just couldn't escape."

"But were you able to find out anything about the engineer?" Amit asked.

"Yes," Rohan said excitedly. "Something strange

happened — he didn't come to work yesterday!"
"Didn't come to work," Shipra repeated slowly. "He may have been ill or something."

"But he didn't ring up, as he usually does," Rohan said. "Dad is a bit suspicious. He is beginning to wonder if he is involved in any way."

"Did you find out his address?" Bubbles asked, highly intrigued by this new development.

"Yes, I did," Rohan said. "I asked the driver. And do you know what he said?" He paused dramatically. "He said he had gone there to check up — Dad asked him to — and the door was locked. He rang the bell several times, but no one answered."

"Locked!" Bubbles's glasses almost fell off in excitement. "Do you think he has flown?"

"Well, I don't think we should believe anything the driver says," Shipra said. "Don't forget he is a suspect, too!"

"Correct," Amit said. "By the way, don't you think we should keep a watch on your father's rivals also?"

"We certainly should," Rohan replied.

"But how many are there?" Shipra asked, wondering how they could keep an eye on so many people at the same time!

"Actually, there is only one," Rohan said. "At least, he is the only one with a set-up capable of manufacturing that machine. So that makes it simple. If he is behind it, one of those fellows will be in touch with him."

"And what did our pal Mr. Spywell have to report?" Bubbles asked.

Rohan grinned. "I asked Dad," he said. "Spywell is following the same track that we are. He was watching Mr. Saroop, Dad's rival yesterday. But he had nothing suspicious to report."

"Hmmm, maybe they are lying low just now," Amit said. "I think we should split up. Two of us could

watch Mr. Saroop's office and two could check up on the engineer."

"Yes, that is what we can do," Rohan said. "But I think only one person should go to Mr. Saroop's office. We don't want it to look too obvious, do we? The rest of us can go across to Satish Kumar, the engineer's place. Since it is in the colony we can act as though we are loafing around."

"Who is going to Mr. Saroop's then?" Bubbles asked.

"I will go," Amit volunteered immediately. "You all go to Satish Kumar's."

"Okay," Shipra said, suppressing a smile. Amit was so eager to play detective. "We will look around here and see what we can find."

"I will push off then," Amit said. "We mustn't waste any time."

Rohan gave Amit detailed instructions on how to find Mr. Saroop's office. He made his way to the bus stop. Carefully following Rohan's directions, Amit found the place quite easily.

But once there, Amit discovered he had a bit of a problem. It would not be that easy to keep a watch without looking conspicuous. Mr. Saroop's office was on the third floor. There was a row of offices opening into a corridor which was almost deserted. He would stick out like a sore thumb, loitering around there. He decided to make the best of it and act as though he were waiting for someone.

It was then that he suddenly realised he had never seen the driver or the engineer. How was he going to recognize them if either of them came to the office? He certainly had not thought of that! The only thing to do was to observe all the people who went into Mr. Saroop's office very closely. He could describe them to Rohan later on and see if any of them resembled one of the two men.

Luckily not too many people visited Mr. Saroop's office. First there was an extremely thin man with sunken eyes and hollow cheeks to match. He wore a neat pin-stripe suit and carried a brief-case. After a while, two men arrived together, one was rather scruffy looking, in a shapeless pullover and unironed pants. The other, a tall, well-built man with a thick moustache, was dressed in a checked brown coat and fawn pants. Then the thin man came out, glanced at Amit curiously, and went down in the lift.

Amit was getting quite bored now. This business of playing detective was not as exciting as he had thought. Nothing was happening! What a way to earn a living! Poor Spywell, he thought.

A bald, tubby man, also in a suit and carrying a brief-case entered the office. Amit threw him a glance. He was getting more and more fidgety, and beginning to wish he were with the others, when — all of the sudden — a vaguely familiar figure, beady-eyed and furtive-looking, stepped out of the lift.

'Who is this guy?' Amit wondered. 'I know him.' It came to him in a flash. 'Gosh! It is Spywell himself! Think of the devil. . .'

What was he to do? Would Spywell recognize him and wonder why he was there? Perhaps he should keep out of sight. But how?

There was a flight of stairs, leading up, down the corridor. Amit decided to edge towards them. Spywell had not noticed him and was standing by the lift, as though waiting for it. Amit could not help feeling a little smug. Spywell had arrived late on the scene. However, from the stairs, he could not get a good view of the corridor. So Amit had to come down again. He stood on the last step, leaning on the bannister, his head turned away. If he heard footsteps, he thought, he would sneak a look quickly.

"Ouch!" He jumped, as someone tapped him smartly on the shoulder. A voice hissed, "What are *you* doing here?" Amit jerked his head around to find Spywell's beady eyes fixed on him.

"Waiting for a friend," he said brightly, astonished that the other had recognized him.

"Hunh!" Spywell replied, in a tone of utter disbelief. He pursed his lips in an irritated manner and strolled away to stand by the lift again. Now and again, he cast distrustful glances at Amit.

Amit decided to put on a little act to convince him. He glanced at his watch, pretending to look impatient. He whistled tunelessly and paced up and down restlessly, as though he were actually waiting for someone who was taking a long time. Spywell watched him with growing irritation.

Then a man came out of Mr. Saroop's office. Spywell immediately lost interest in Amit. His look of irritation vanished as he watched the man closely. The man pressed the button for the lift. It came up. Several people got out. The man entered the lift. Spywell scurried after him. Amit did the same, convinced by Spywell's behaviour that the man was worth following.

As he hurried into the lift, he stepped on someone's foot. The man, who was also entering the lift, cursed angrily. "Sorry," Amit mumbled, then turned to take a second look at the man. He was short and slight, dressed in new but cheap-looking clothes and he carried an expensive brief-case.

When they got to the ground floor, the first man walked out briskly to a car parked outside. The second stood there hesitantly for a moment, then quickly hailed an auto-rickshaw. Spywell jumped on to his scooter at once. Amit stood staring after them, dismayed.

He did not have enough money on him to take an auto-rickshaw, and he was not sure which of the three

to follow, though he felt Spywell would be the best bet.

Suddenly, he had a flash of inspiration. Maybe the first man was Mr. Saroop! That was why Spywell had been so interested in him. The second man could be the driver, or the engineer's accomplice! The brief-case he carried could be the stolen one. Which could be the reason he was following Mr. Saroop. To deliver the plans to him after he missed him at the office.

Gosh, what a discovery! It was just too bad he could not follow them. But Spywell was on the job and they would get the information.

He had to tell the others about it. Rohan would be able to identify the man from his descriptions. He immediately made a bee-line for the bus stop, wondering if the others had made some interesting discoveries, too.

But Shipra, Rohan and Bubbles had got no farther in their investigations. As soon as Amit had left, they too had got up to go. Just as they were leaving, a voice called out, "Rohan, baby, where are you off to?"

Rohan flushed. It was his mother. "Just somewhere here, nearby," he said quickly, embarrassed at being called 'baby' in front of the girls.

"Oh — hh! And I stayed home today just to be with you. You always complain that I am never at home. And now you are going off yourself."

A rather heavily made-up lady, with masses of wavy hair falling to her shoulders, dressed in a stylishly cut *salwar-kameez* came into the room.

"Are these your friends?" she asked in honeyed tones.

Rohan looked even more embarrassed. He stood there, not knowing what to say. He wished his mother had chosen another day to spend at home with him! Bubbles gazed admiringly at her. 'What a smart mother!' she thought. But Shipra frowned irritably. She hated baby talk!

"You can't go off like that," Rohan's mother continued.

Rohan looked at the girls helplessly.

"Come on, girls, we will all watch a movie together. Won't that be fun?" asked his mother.

Shipra sighed audibly, but Bubbles covered up by saying quickly, "We would love that. We can go later, can't we, Rohan?"

Rohan shrugged. "Okay," he said, though he looked rather sulky.

They sat through a not very interesting movie on the video, which only Bubbles enjoyed — and that too because she was so taken up by Rohan's mother! Her clothes, her hair-style, her perfume, all met with Bubbles's hearty approval! After that Mrs. Kapoor insisted on their having lunch. It was late afternoon by the time they finished.

A discovery

"Let us go now," Shipra said, eager to be off.

Bubbles yawned loudly. "Gosh, I am really feeling drowsy now. That was a fabulous lunch, Rohan."

"I am sorry," Rohan said sheepishly. "Mummy really upset the whole programme."

"Never mind," Shipra said. "We can still go. But let us stop at Amit's place and check up. He might have returned and may have something to tell us."

"Yes, let us do that," Bubbles said. "We can also check up at home if there is any news from the hospital."

When they got home, they discovered that Shipra's mother had called from the hospital. The operation had gone off well and she would be home by the evening. They found Amit having lunch.

"I was just going to come over," he said. "I have got lots to tell you."

Between generous mouthfuls, he related his experiences to them. "I am wondering," he said finally, "if the first man, the one who went off in the car, was Mr. Saroop."

"What did he look like?" Rohan asked. "I have seen him once or twice."

"Medium height, stout, wheatish complexion and greying hair. He also had rather heavy sideburns."

"That is him!" Rohan exclaimed. "And the other?"

Amit described the man. "Who do you think he is?"

Rohan shook his head. "Doesn't sound like anyone I know," he said. He paused as something suddenly struck him. "The brief-case, was it a navy blue VIP?"

"Well, it was navy blue but I am not sure if it was VIP," Amit said slowly. "Do you think..."

"Yes!" Rohan cried, "that was the brief-case that was stolen! But who could the man be?"

"Probably the engineer's accomplice," Bubbles said.

"But did Mr. Saroop speak to the man, or appear to recognise him?" Shipra asked.

"No," Amit said, "not at all."

"That is strange," Shipra said thoughtfully, "if he is involved in the theft. And why did the man go to the office? Surely it would have been easier to go to his house, where fewer people would have noticed him."

"Maybe it was all part of the plan," Rohan said. "I will find out what Spywell discovered when he followed them."

"Yeah, do that," Bubbles said. "But it does seem as though Mr. Saroop is behind the theft."

"I don't think we can be sure, yet," Rohan said.

"True," said Amit. "There are tons of navy blue VIP brief-cases. What about the engineer, did you find out anything?"

"Well, yes and no," Rohan said. "We couldn't go to his place, but I have his address so we can go right now. I asked the driver."

The house with the address they had been given was right at the other end of the colony where they stayed. Also, the numbering was rather haphazard; so they had a hard time finding it. When they finally did, they got a big shock. It was an empty plot.

"Are you sure you have the right number?" Bubbles asked, as the four of them stood there, gazing incredulously at the empty plot, thoroughly confused.

"But this is the address the driver gave me," Rohan said.

"Why don't we check up the number of this empty plot?" Amit said.

He rang the bell of the house next to the plot. An elderly lady opened the door.

"Excuse me," Amit said politely, "could you tell us where A-159 is?"

"159?" asked the woman. "Oh that is the next plot. But it has not been built on as yet."

"Thank you," Amit said. "Sorry to have bothered you."

The woman looked at them curiously. "Who are you looking for?" she asked.

"A Satish Kumar," Rohan said.

She shook her head emphatically. "There is no Satish Kumar staying around here," she said. "You have got the number wrong."

"That is strange," Rohan said as they walked away disappointed. "The driver said that he went to his house..."

"I think he deliberately gave you the wrong number," Amit broke in. "For some reason he did not want you to go there."

"But didn't he realise he would be found out if you

went there?" Shipra said. She snapped her fingers suddenly. "Hold it . . ." she said. "I think I have got the answer. Let us try A-59 and B-159 and C-159. I am sure he wouldn't have given you a totally wrong number. That way he could pretend that you had heard wrong."

"Yes," Bubbles said, perking up at once. "I think it is worth a try. We must not give up so easily."

"It definitely is worth a try," Amit said. "Since we have no other lead. But why did he do that? After all, sooner or later we would be landing up at Satish Kumar's house."

"Maybe we will find out if we get there," Rohan said. "Come on, let us get moving — fast."

They spent another half an hour searching for A-59. Eventually they found it — and, wonder of wonders, found it was the right house! Satish Kumar did live there. His name was on the gate, and a lady standing there told them that he lived upstairs. She also said that he was not at home. Several people had come asking for him during the past couple of days. None of them had found him at home.

"We will see for ourselves," Bubbles said. And they went up the stairs. They stopped at the door and knocked. There was no reply. They knocked again and again. Frustrated, Amit tried the handle. To their surprise, the door swung open. They rushed in.

Satish Kumar was a bachelor, living alone in a two-room flat. There was a large, open terrace and the rooms were at one end. The place looked neglected. Dust and bits of papers lay in corners. A couple of folding chairs stood at one end. To their disappointment the main door of the flat was locked and so were the others.

"He really has disappeared," Shipra said. "The driver was not telling lies. You must have heard the number wrong, Rohan."

Rohan looked bewildered. "I was so sure that he said A-159," he said.

"How utterly frustrating," Bubbles said with a groan. "Another dead end. I could just scream, I am so put out. What do we do now?"

Reluctant to leave and abandon their search, they strolled around the terrace, not sure what they were looking for. A few pots of cactii and money plants standing near the main door looked wilted and dried. It was beginning to get dark now. They had spent a long time searching for the house.

"At least this confirms our suspicions," Rohan said. "Satish Kumar is obviously involved. So it is not really a dead end."

"Hmmm," Shipra said absently. She was trying to peer in through one of the windows. Though a partially drawn curtain did not allow her a full view of the room, she could see part of a table and a built-in cupboard.

"Ummmgn — gn!" A strange sound startled Shipra. She looked around. It seemed to have come from the room. A peculiar sound, half choked, as though someone were trying to say something, but could not get the words out!

"Listen!" she cried, "did you hear that? It came from the room. Is . . . is anybody there?" she called out loudly.

The others rushed to the window at once, straining their ears. The half-strangled sound came again, as if in reply.

"I heard it, I heard it," Bubbles said. "Somebody is in there . . ."

"Ssh-sh," Rohan hissed. His sharp ears had caught another sound. "Someone is coming!" he said.

They could hear voices and footsteps on the stairs. For a moment they stood rooted to the spot, not knowing what to do.

"Hide," Shipra urged. Something made her uneasy.

"But where?"

"The wall!" Rohan cried.

They rushed to the low wall that ran between this terrace and the adjoining one, and jumped over and crouched on the other side.

The voices were louder now. They heard the lock being opened and then the door. Hardly daring to breathe they exchanged questioning looks.

"Maybe it is only Satish," Rohan whispered. "Shall we go and see?"

"Then who is inside the room?" Shipra demanded.

"Let us wait and see," Amit advised and Bubbles nodded, wide-eyed.

They heard the strangled sounds again among the voices of men.

"They are murdering somebody!" Bubbles whispered wildly. "We have got to stop them!"

"Shut up!" Shipra mouthed, afraid they would be overheard.

They looked at each other uneasily. Was someone really being murdered? Then Bubbles sprang up and jumped over the wall, followed by the others. But the door was locked and there was no one to be seen. They ran to the main door, which opened on to the stairs and got a shock — the door was locked!

"We are locked in!" Shipra cried. They ran to the side of the terrace and peered over, just in time to see a man being hustled into a black Ambassador. Doors slammed and the car drove off immediately.

A passing headlight flashed on the number plate, illuminating it clearly. Rohan read out the number and said, "Remember that!"

"But how do we get out?" Bubbles asked.

"Let us try the next terrace," Amit said.

Again they clambered over the wall. They ran across the empty terrace, tried the door leading out to see if it was open. It was. They tiptoed down the stairs nervously, wondering what they would say if someone caught them. But no one did. In fact they made it to the main door without any problem. But as they were going out, a man came in from the gate and stared at them questioningly.

"Namaste," Amit said, folding his hands in greeting.

The man nodded, puzzled and the children ran out, trying not to laugh. They only stopped running when they were a good distance from the house.

"Whew!" Bubbles breathed when they finally stopped.

"That was close," Rohan said, heaving a sign of relief. "But isn't it funny that the door was open when we went in?"

"Probably someone forgot to lock it properly," Shipra said. "I don't think they would have taken the risk of leaving the door unlocked with somebody in there."

"But who was it?" Bubbles asked. "Do you think it was Satish Kumar?"

"Imprisoned in his own house?" Amit said. "Could be. Or it could be somebody else if Satish Kumar is the villain of the piece."

"You know," Shipra said, "I think it was Satish Kumar shut up in there. Why, I don't know. I feel the driver must be the main culprit. When Rohan asked for Satish Kumar's address he must have been apprehensive that he might discover something, so he misled him. But he knew sooner or later he would have to

tell him the right address. So he decided to remove Satish Kumar from there."

"Right!" Rohan said. "Satish Kumar could have managed to attract someone's attention on his own, too. Dad was also suspicious when he didn't turn up the day after the robbery. He had mentioned his suspicions to the police. Spywell was also snooping around. They could have thought of taking a closer look at his flat to find some evidence."

"So he was probably removed to a safer place, where no one could discover him," Bubbles said.

"I wonder why he was imprisoned," Amit said.

"We must find out more about the driver now," Shipra said. "He is the man to watch."

"Hmm, do you think he was there today?" Amit asked.

"I wonder," Rohan said. "We did not get a close look at any of the men. It was too dark."

"Where does your driver live?" Bubbles asked him. "Do you think he has taken Satish Kumar to his house?"

"I can find out," Rohan said.

"And does he smoke? Remember the cigarette stubs," Shipra said.

"Oh, yeah," Amit said. "We have to check that out."

"He does smoke," Rohan said, "and," he said more excitedly, "it would have been very easy for him to hide on the terrace. He could have pretended he was leaving after work and instead of going out, slipped up to the terrace."

"Gosh! It does seem more likely that he is the culprit," Bubbles said. "Are you going to tell your Dad you suspect him?"

"Not yet," Rohan said. "I want to have something more concrete."

"Yes," Shipra agreed, "and now we had better run home."

Bubbles and Shipra had finished dinner and were curled up on the sofa watching TV when the doorbell shrilled loudly.

"Who could it be at this hour?" Shipra grumbled uncurling herself from her comfortable seat. She peeped through the 'magic eye'. They had been told never to open the door before checking, specially at night. A familiar, plump figure stood outside – Amit.

He bounced in impatiently as soon as she unhooked the safety latch. "Have you all forgotten?" he said. "Tomorrow is our picnic."

"Oh – h," said Bubbles who had leaned forward eagerly, sinking back into the sofa. "I thought you had some exciting news for us."

"Well, this is pretty exciting," Amit said teasingly, grinning at her obvious disappointment.

"But we *had* forgotten," Shipra said. "We didn't even ask Mummy if we could go."

"You can ask her right now," Amit said. "Rohan just rang up to remind me. He will be around to pick us up at ten o'clock."

"Gosh, with all those happenings it completely slipped our minds," Bubbles said.

Just then Shipra's mother came into the room. "What is the matter, Amit?" she asked surprised to see him there at that late hour.

"Mummy," Shipra said, "we forgot to ask you – we had planned to go for a picnic tomorrow to Qutab Minar. Rohan has never seen it properly. May we go, please?"

"Tomorrow..." Mrs. Tandon said doubtfully. "But how will you all go?"

"Rohan is getting his car and driver," Amit said.

"But what about food?" asked Shipra's mother.

"Well, Rohan is bringing something and Mummy is making a cake and some snacks."

"*Achchaa* (OK), I made a lot of *gajar halwa* today and maybe I can make some stuffed *paranthas* tomorrow morning..."

"And some pickle, *Mausi*," Bubbles interrupted. "Some of that yummy mango pickle!"

"Yes and some fruit," Shipra said. "Okay, Amit, tell Rohan we will be ready at ten."

"Fine! See you tomorrow," Amit said. "Good night, Auntie, good night, girls."

Friday turned out to be a beautiful day. The murky fog that had hung over the city the past few days disappeared miraculously. The sky was clear and the sun shone brightly.

"Get up, sleepyhead," Shipra cried, shaking Bubbles when she returned from her morning jog. "Look what lovely weather it is for our picnic."

The word 'picnic' did the trick. Bubbles shot up at once. Shipra went to help her mother to pack up the food they were taking. The two girls quickly swallowed their breakfast, then ran out to see if Amit was ready.

A white Maruti van was parked at Amit's gate. An enormous basket of food was being loaded into the van. "Rohan is here!" Bubbles cried.

"Gosh! We are certainly not going to starve, are we?" Shipra said, seeing another large basket inside the van, also a big thermos and a crate of soft drinks.

"We are not taking any chances." Amit said grinning. "Besides, the great outdoors always gives me a big appetite."

"When don't you have a big appetite?" Shipra retorted, laughing.

"Come on, girls, pile in," Rohan said. They quickly climbed into the van. Their baskets were loaded in too. Then they started off.

Suddenly, Bubbles clutched Shipra's arm and gestured towards the driver, an elderly man with a rather kindly face. "Is he our suspect?" she hissed in her ear.

Rohan, who was sitting in front with the driver, turned around with a smile. He had overheard Bubbles. "No," he said, "this is another guy."

"Thank god," Bubbles heaved a sigh of relief. "I wouldn't have felt comfortable at all."

"So, what is new?" Shipra asked Rohan. "Did Spywell have anything to report?"

"Oh, that," Rohan glanced meaningfully at the driver. "We will discuss that later. There have been some very interesting developments." He looked rather serious when he said that, which made the others really impatient to hear all about it. But they would have to wait till they got off and could talk in private.

The morning rush hour was not over yet and the traffic was still quite heavy on some of the roads. So the going was slow. Still the drive was enjoyable in the cheerful sunshine which was really welcome after all those gloomy days. All the roundabouts were a blaze of colour, with winter flowers – pansies, phlox, stock, nasturtiums – in full bloom. Some of the fountains were playing too, adding to the charm of the scene.

As they neared the Qutab, the traffic thinned down considerably. The monument looked spectacular, outlined against the blue winter sky. There were the usual rows of tourist buses and taxis outside and hawkers vending their wares.

"Let us find a nice spot before lugging our stuff out," Shipra said.

"Yes, let us do that first," Amit said. They all jumped out quickly, while the driver parked the van.

The green, grassy lawns, the abundant shrubs and the red gravelled walks presented a most attractive sight. There were a number of visitors around, but

being a weekday it was not as crowded as it generally was on a holiday.

They found a pleasant spot near a shady tree. "This is where we are going to sit," Bubbles decided.

"Okay," Rohan said, "let us get everything here."

They unloaded their things with the driver's help. It seemed a lot of food for four children.

"Don't worry," Amit said, "it will vanish in no time."

"Yeah, our mothers will scream if we carry all this back," Shipra said. "We will have to eat it up or give it away before we go."

A wild goose chase

The rug they had brought was spread on the ground and the baskets were neatly lined up.

"Come on, I am dying to hear it all," Bubbles said impatiently, throwing herself down on the rug. "If you don't tell me now, I will really burst with curiosity."

Rohan looked around carefully, though there was no one within earshot. The driver had gone off and found some pals to chat with.

"Last night," he said in low, conspiratorial tones, as the others leaned forward eagerly, "my father got a phone call. From somebody, who claimed to have the plans in his possession. He is demanding one lakh rupees in exchange for them."

Bubbles and Shipra gasped, shocked at this development."

"One lakh!" Amit exclaimed. "That is a lot of money."

"Yes," Rohan said. "But my father is prepared to pay anything to get them back."

"When is he supposed to give the money?" Shipra asked, "and where?"

"He did not tell us. He said he would call again today and if we informed the police he would destroy the plans."

"Gosh!" Bubbles exclaimed breathlessly. "I really wish we could catch the crooks before the money is handed over."

"I think we should have cancelled this picnic," Shipra said, "and got on the driver's trail."

"We can leave early," Amit said, "as soon as we finish lunch. That should give us time to find out something. And what did Spywell discover?"

"Oh, Spywell," Rohan said exasperatedly. "You know, he sneaked on us. He said that he found you hanging around yesterday, and that this was not some kind of a game for children. Dad was quite annoyed and ticked me off, though I insisted you were waiting for somebody out there. He said this could ruin the whole surveillance plan and give the show away."

"How mean!" Bubbles said.

"I knew he was a nasty fellow," Shipra said. "Could he find a link between Mr. Saroop and the thieves?"

"No, he goofed it up. He followed Mr. Saroop for a while. The other man was also going in the same direction. Then Spywell's scooter broke down and he lost them."

"What an ass!" Amit said, disgusted. "He could have discovered something worthwhile."

"He did go later to Mr. Saroop's factory," Rohan said, "after fixing his scooter. But the man with the brief-case was not around. Spywell met Mr. Saroop, pretending to be some sort of a salesman."

"The man could hardly be expected to hang around till Spywell decided to turn up," Amit said.

"But someone is trying to sell the plans back to

you, that means it is not Mr. Saroop who is behind it," Shipra pointed out.

"So it seems," Rohan said. "Probably the thieves were acting on their own. Maybe they could not fix up a deal with Mr. Saroop, as they had expected, so they are trying to sell it back to us."

"I think we should go and check up your driver's house immediately after lunch," Amit said. "If Satish Kumar is there we can try to free him, and we will be able to solve the mystery. Did you get his address?"

"I did," Rohan said. "I took a look at his driving licence which was lying in the car. It is not too far from the colony. We may even be able to walk down. Shall we look around a bit and then have lunch?"

They strolled around the grounds, and looked at all the ruins. Bubbles tried to put her arms around the famous iron pillar, since it was supposed to be lucky. She managed, with the others pulling her arms around to meet. She was thrilled! She considered it a good omen!

Then they climbed up the Minar. Since it was a clear day, they could see far into the distance. The city spread out before them, buildings, trees, roads and open spaces, stretching far away into the horizon. Not wanting to waste too much time, they all descended as quickly as they could down the worn-out, old steps.

"How about lunch now?" Amit said.

"Okay, I think it is about time we put you out of your misery," Shipra said, smiling mischievously.

Paper plates and glasses were produced and the food passed around. They were all astonished at their appetites. Chocolate cake and *gajar halwa* completed the treat.

"Gosh," Rohan said, "I didn't know I could put away so much!"

"Neither did I," Shipra said. "Anyone got room for some oranges?"

No one did, so they decided to pack up and leave. In fifteen minutes, they were on their way back. The heavy meal and the long drive made them all quite drowsy. In fact, Amit had dropped off to sleep when he heard Bubbles exclaim, "Look, the car, the black Ambassador."

"What? What?" Amit got up with a start.

Everybody craned their necks eagerly to look at the car.

"Yes, the number is the same," Rohan said excitedly. "It is the same car!"

"Anand Singh," Rohan said to the driver, "follow that car!"

The driver looked puzzled but complied. There was not much traffic at that hour and it was easy to keep behind the car.

"He doesn't seem to realise we are following him as yet," Shipra said, biting her nails nervously. The man drove at a leisurely pace making them rather impatient!

"What are we planning to do?" Bubbles asked. "Follow the car to wherever it is going?"

"Yes," Rohan said. "We must find out whose car it is."

"What luck!" Amit said. "Imagine coming across the car! This could be a very important lead."

"Well, let us see where he leads us," Shipra said.

They were approaching a big market. The black Ambassador suddenly turned into the road leading to the market. They followed suit. The car stopped in the parking lot and a man got out. A short, podgy man, with a receding hairline, thick glasses and a small moustache. He hardly looked the type who would kidnap anyone! The children looked at each other doubtfully.

"Are you sure it is the same car?" Shipra asked.

"Of course, it is!" Bubbles said firmly. "I remember the number clearly."

"I do, too," Rohan said, "but he doesn't seem to look like any of those men..."

"We didn't really see them properly," Amit said. "Quick, let us see what he is doing. Maybe he has realised we are following him and is trying to evade us."

They jumped out of the van and ran after the man, just in time to see him disappear into a shop. They followed him in.

"Oh," Shipra said, rather disappointed, "he is just buying some stuff."

"Hmm," Amit said, "I think it is a cover-up."

"Come on," Rohit nudged him. "He is leaving."

The man had paid his bill and was walking out with his purchases. Trying to appear natural, they all trooped out too, and trailed behind him into another shop.

The man gave them a curious glance.

"He is looking at us," Shipra whispered. "He has noticed us, I think."

They pretended to examine some goods on the shelves, keeping an eye on him at the same time. Suddenly, Bubbles began to giggle uncontrollably.

"Shut up," Shipra hissed furiously. "You will give us away."

"I can't help it," Bubbles said. "I was watching him from the corner of my eye, and he was doing the same." She began to giggle again.

"I told you!" Amit whispered triumphantly. "He is suspicious!"

The man went out again. He paused in front of a shop as though making up his mind whether to go in or not. The children stopped too. Then the man turned on his heel and walked swiftly past them straight to

his car. He shot them an angry look as he got in and before they realised what was happening, he had started the car and driven away.

Immediately, the four friends raced to the van and jumped in.

"*Jaldee* (quick)! Anand Singh, follow him," Rohan ordered the driver.

Anand Singh looked disapproving. "*Bhaiya* (brother), what is this?" he said. "Sahib will be angry."

"No, he won't. Hurry now!"

Reluctantly Anand Singh speeded up and followed the man. There were two cars between them. But at the next crossing they turned off. The man continued to drive fast. They could see him glancing at the mirror from time to time. Then he turned into a lane leading to a residential area. Glumly, Anand Singh followed. Suddenly, the man slowed down, pulled over to one side, and stopped.

"Slow down!" said Rohan, foxed.

On the trail

The man got out and gestured to them. Mystified, they stopped the van and got out.

"What is the meaning of all this?" he burst out angrily. "I noticed you have been following me. Don't deny it! Is it your idea of a joke? Ill-mannered brats."

They could only stare helplessly at each other, stunned at the outburst. This was hardly the reaction they had expected. From being the accusers they had become the accused!

Amit tried to put on his polite act. "Sir, we can explain..."

"Explain what? I want your names and addresses.

I am going to complain to your parents!"

"But, sir..." Shipra kicked Amit hard. She did not want him to explain too much.

"What were you doing last evening?" Bubbles asked the man accusingly.

"What was I doing last evening?" The man sounded as though he could not believe his ears. He looked so indignant that Shipra could not help smiling.

"How dare you? It is none of your business!"

"But, sir," Amit said in the smoothest possible tones, "last evening, a man was kidnapped in this car."

"What! Kidnapped in this car?" He was almost purple now. "The idea! You kids watch too many movies and begin to imagine things. How dare you say such a thing?"

The man's indignation was so genuine that Shipra began to feel sure that he had nothing to do with the affair. But they had definitely seen the very same car. Had the men used false number plates? Or had they used the car without the owner's knowledge?

"It is possible," she said gently, "that you may have left the car somewhere and someone may have misused it."

The man gave her a sharp look. He let out a long breath, seemed to think for a while, then said, "Well, the car wasn't with me yesterday. As a matter of fact, it was at the mechanic's. Yes, I only got it back this morning."

"Who is your mechanic, sir?" Rohan asked eagerly.

The man began to frown again. He obviously did not like being cross-questioned.

Understanding, Bubbles said smilingly, "Please don't be angry, sir. But we did see a man being carried off in this car last evening. The police are searching for him."

Mollified by their polite tones and the mention of the police, the man said, rather grudgingly though,

"Sunder Lal, on GT Road, Shahdra."

"Thank you, sir," they chorused.

A ghost of a smile appeared on the man's face. "Now listen, tell your parents. Don't meddle in these things ..." he said, noticing that they were about to run off.

But the children were already in the van. They drove off homewards.

"Wow, did he blow a fuse!" Bubbles said, giggling.

"But what a discovery!" Shipra said. "This means the mechanic is also in the picture!"

"Listen," Rohan said, "I think our car goes there for repairs, too." He turned to the driver, "Anand Singh, where do we have the car serviced?"

"On GT Road, *bhaiya,* at Sunder Lal's workshop."

"It all ties up," Amit said thoughtfully.

They fell silent, trying to figure out the new developments.

The driver and the mechanic were accomplices, Shipra thought, but why was the engineer kidnapped? Just to throw suspicion on him, so that no one thought of the driver? That was probably the reason. But how long would they hold him? Would they let him go after getting the money? He could easily give them away. They would have to find him somehow, before the ransom was given. Satish Kumar's life could be in danger.

They decided to have a powwow in Amit's room to decide their next plan of action.

"I will get off first for the address," Rohan said.

"Thank you, Anand Singh," said Amit, Shipra and Bubbles together when they got off.

"How will we search the driver's house — what is his name by the way?" Shipra asked, when they had settled down.

"Jit Singh," Rohan said. "That is a problem, all right."

"We will have to think up of an excuse," Amit said,

"something reasonable, something that won't arouse suspicion."

"Does he have a family?" Bubbles asked.

"I think so, yes, I think he has a wife."

"Hmmm, so how do we go about it?" Shipra asked, thinking hard.

"I know," Bubbles said. "One of us can pretend to be a chance visitor, a long lost relative whom the wife doesn't know — or even a chatty neighbour."

"Good idea!" Amit said approvingly. "But who will be the visitor?"

"Bubbles!" Shipra said. "I can see her as a perfect, chatty neighbour!"

Half an hour later, a gaudily-dressed woman stepped out of Amit's gate. She wore a nylon sari with a pattern of big, bright flowers. Draped over her head, it concealed most of her hair. A large *bindi* and dark lipstick completed her make-up.

A giggling trio watched her progress down the road.

A suspicious voice from inside the house sobered them. "Who was that woman, Amit, the one who just went out of the gate?"

For a moment they were struck dumb, then Amit spoke up, "Oh, she was trying to sell something, Mummy, some plastic stuff. I told her we didn't want any."

"Hmmm, just keep the gate closed and the doors locked. Some of these people are thieves."

"Saved!" Shipra said, when Amit's mother seemed satisfied with the explanation. "I thought we were caught out."

"That was quick thinking," Rohan said.

The next problem was to locate Jit Singh's house. Luckily it was but walking distance. After a short walk they entered a neighbourhood of rutted lanes, with dishevelled children playing about. Women

sat outside their houses on string cots, wrapped in shawls, knitting, shelling peas or just chatting. A *dhobi* was working his way through a pile of ironing. Bubbles was walking behind them now. They were supposed to locate the house and let her know.

"Let us ask him," Shipra said, moving towards the *dhobi*. "He might be able to direct us."

Rohan produced the paper with the address. "Where would we find this house?" he asked.

The man gave them a curious look. He glanced at the address, scratched his head, then said, pointing to their right, "Go straight down this lane, then turn to the left. You will find a small grocery shop, it is just next to it."

Following his directions, they came to the shop. There the three of them stopped. "Bubbles, we are there now," Amit said loudly, without looking at her. "It is the house to the right."

Drawing a deep breath, Bubbles knocked loudly on the door. The number was scrawled on it, so she was sure she was at the right house. The door opened and a small, mousy woman, with large, bulging eyes, heavily outlined with *kaajal* (kohl) peeped out.

Bubbles put on a friendly smile. "I am new to this neighbourhood," she said. "I wanted to meet my neighbours."

A little reluctantly, the woman invited Bubbles inside and closed the door.

What followed was an excruciating forty-five minute wait for the three outside. They walked around the lanes, bought sweets from the shop, watched a cricket match in progress in one of the lanes, and sighed with impatience.

"Really," Shipra said, "she is taking her role of a chatty neighbour too seriously."

"Maybe she has discovered something," Rohan said hopefully.

The door opened and Bubbles appeared, bidding goodbye effusively. She walked down the road rapidly. The woman stood at the doorstep, watching Bubbles till she turned the corner.

Trying to look casual, the other three strolled after her, though they longed to catch up and ask her what had happened. Bubbles practically raced home, eager to shed her disguise!

The others ran after her. "What happened?" Shipra asked as Bubbles furiously tugged off the pins which had held her curly hair back.

"How many pins did you stick in?" she asked Shipra.

"Bubbles, please. We want to know!" Amit said impatiently.

"Okay, okay," Bubbles said, still pulling out the pins. "Satish Kumar is not there!"

"Oh — h!" Their faces fell.

"There was only one room, so there was no problem looking around."

"Are you sure it was the right place?"

"Yes, the woman said her husband worked as a driver."

"Then what took you so long?" Shipra asked

Bubbles grimaced. "She wanted to chat and she insisted on making tea."

"So that means Satish Kumar is being held somewhere else," Rohan said. "But where?"

They were to discover that pretty soon.

More disguises

"Hey, Shipra, Bubbles!" It was Amit yelling across the wall which separated the two houses.

After Bubbles's discovery, or rather non-discovery, the previous evening, they had all gone home. Rohan

had promised to arrive with the latest news as early as possible the next day.

Shipra came out running. "What is it?" she asked Amit.

"Come over, quick! Rohan is here!" he said.

Shipra ran to call Bubbles. Her heart thudded with excitement. What did Rohan have to tell them? Maybe the ransom was to be paid today. Bubbles had heard Amit yelling and was already hurrying out. They sped across to Amit's house. The two boys were already in the *barsati*.

"What is the news?" the girls asked breathlessly.

Rohan looked a bit tense. "The ransom is to be paid today," he said. "We got a call last night."

"When?" Shipra asked.

"Where?" Bubbles put in.

"At the New Delhi railway station."

"The railway station! We must be there," Shipra said at once.

"Yes," Bubbles said. "We couldn't rescue Satish Kumar, maybe we can help nab the crooks."

"The time is four o'clock. The brief-case with the money is to be left on the bench near the second refreshment stall after the reservation charts on platform number eight," said Rohan.

"Strange," Amit said, "I thought ransom was always picked up from deserted places."

"Probably these people feel safer in a crowd," Shipra said. "If someone tried to catch them, it would be easier to make a getaway."

"Sounds pretty risky to me," Bubbles said. "Suppose someone else walks off with the money?"

"They will be keeping a close watch, I am sure," Rohan said. "They won't let anyone else take it. They warned us again not to inform the police."

"Have you?" Shipra asked.

"So far Dad has not," Rohan said. "Spywell is supposed to keep watch."

"I doubt if he will be of any use," Bubbles said. "Who will deliver the money?"

"Dad himself."

"But he might recognise us."

"We will disguise ourselves," Amit said with gusto. The idea had become very appealing after Bubbles's successful charade.

"Please, not me!" Bubbles said. "I had enough of it yesterday."

"If you all hang around some stall unobtrusively, he may not notice you," Rohan said. "I am the one who has to be careful."

"Are they going to return the plans at the same time?" Shipra asked.

"No," Rohan said. "They said the brief-case with the plans has been kept at the left Luggage Office. Once they have checked up the money they will send the ticket to us by evening."

"I don't like this at all," Bubbles said. "They could very well vanish with the money and not return the plans."

"We have no choice but to trust them," Rohan said gloomily.

They could all see that he was very worried about the whole affair and really wished they could catch the crooks and recover the plans.

"I wish we had something definite to link Jit Singh with the affair," Amit said. "Then we could confide our suspicions to the police."

"What about the cigarette stubs?" Shipra said eagerly. "Were you able to make out the brand?"

"I did look at them with my magnifying glass. I was able to make out something faintly. I think it was Charminar."

"That is it!" Rohan said excitedly. "I noticed last evening. He was smoking and he threw away an empty packet. I picked it up later and saw the name!"

"That proves it then!" Bubbles said. "It was Jit Singh on the roof that night. Let us go to the police. Tell your father, Rohan."

"But you are forgetting one thing," Amit said slowly. "He could easily deny having been there that night. The cigarette stubs are really no proof. He could say he had been smoking there some other time."

"Yeah," Rohan said, looking downcast. "We have to catch them red-handed. The only thing to do is to keep a close watch on the brief-case — follow whoever picks it up and then nab them at their hide-out!"

"Okay, then," Shipra said, "what time should we leave for the station?"

"We will have to leave separately," Amit said, "since we will be disguised. I don't want Spywell pouncing on me again."

"I bet he will goof up again," Bubbles said.

"He has been told he won't be paid if he does," Rohan said.

"So, listen," Shipra said. "I think we will leave a little before three o'clock. We will find the nearest book stall and pretend to leaf through magazines while keeping a sharp eye on things. Watch out for us."

"Yeah," Bubbles said, "since we won't be able to recognise you, hopefully."

"I think I will go home for a while," Rohan said, "and come back later. If there is any change in the programme, I will let you know."

Shipra and Bubbles left, too. They discovered it was already lunch time. They were so excited that they could hardly swallow their food.

"What is the matter with you two?" asked Shipra's mother, noticing their poor appetites.

"They must have been gorging themselves at Amit's place, I am sure," Pooja said teasingly.

"No, I mean, yes," Bubbles said quickly, as Shipra kicked her under the table.

"We had a lot of chocolate cake," Shipra said loudly.

Mrs. Tandon shook her head. "Shipra, I don't like this habit of yours. Munching snacks in between and then not eating your meals properly."

"I am going to the hospital this afternoon," she told Bubbles. "But as your *Dadiji* is still very weak, your mother said you should visit her only after a day or two."

"Give them all my love, *Mausiji,*" Bubbles said, getting up from the dining table. "How will we get to the station?" she asked, as soon as they got to their room.

"Yeah, how are we going to get there?" Shipra said, thinking aloud. "I know, we will take one of those mini buses with 'Railway Station' written on them. They run quite frequently."

"Are you not excited, Shipra?" Bubbles's eyes gleamed behind her spectacles. "I wonder what is going to happen!"

A tense hour passed. They tried to play cards to while away the time, but found they were watching the clock instead! Finally Bubbles flung away the cards. "This is the most boring game I have ever played," she said.

Shipra agreed with her. "Let us go. I am fed up of waiting. It will take us some time to get a bus and reach the station."

They got up and tidied themselves. Both girls were dressed sensibly in jeans and jackets. The station could be quite cold and a particularly chilly wind was blowing that day.

As they were leaving, Shipra noticed the maid-servant, Kalyani, coming in to wash the dishes.

"Where is Mohini?" she asked her. She had not seen the little girl for several days.

"I have sent her away, to Govindpur," Kalyani replied maliciously. "She was no help to me here."

Shipra stared at her, speechless. She had no idea Kalyani could be so mean.

"What a terrible woman!" Bubbles said. "Poor Mohini! Imagine having a mother like that."

"She actually sent the poor girl away," Shipra said heatedly, "because she wants her to work all the time and not learn to read and write."

They had to wait at the bus-stop a good fifteen minutes before a bus arrived. There was no room to sit, so they stood, hanging onto the rail till they reached the station.

"We are quite early," Bubbles said, looking at her watch.

"Good," Shipra said. "We will have plenty of time to scout around."

They went to buy platform tickets, then joined the throng of people streaming into the station.

Bubbles loved railway stations. She loved the crowds, the noise, the constant hubbub. Most of all she loved the eatables the vendors sold. The hot, puffy *puris,* the spicy *alu-sabzi* that went with it, the crisp *pakoras* and the hot, sour chutney you dipped them in, the steaming tea served in earthenware tumblers, all tasted delicious to her.

"Platform number eight," Shipra said, looking at the sign as they walked across the overbridge. "Down this way. Come along, Bubbles, look out for the second refreshment stall, after the reservation charts."

Weaving their way through rushing coolies, stacks of luggage piled haphazardly, innumerable hawkers uttering deafening cries, they kept a look-out for the stall. There was a train at the platform, ready to

depart. People were getting on and off, checking reservations, buying things or seeing others off.

A piteous cry assailed their ears. *"Beti,* a coin for this poor old man!"

Mechanically, Bubbles opened her purse and flung a coin into the battered tin bowl. To her utter astonishment the begger winked at her, as he murmured his blessings.

"Amit!" Shipra gasped, then quickly composed herself, looking around to see if anyone had noticed.

"What a fantastic disguise!" Bubbles said. "He really fooled me."

"Doesn't he look pathetic?" Shipra said, giggling. "He is earning quite a bit, he is so convincing," she said noticing the steady stream of coins pouring into the tin bowl.

Amit did look quite a convincing beggar. He had wrapped a dirty sheet around himself, effectively hiding his unbeggarly bulk! A cap perched on his head. His make-up made him look quite haggard and a straggly stubble and moustache completed the effect. He frequently took part in plays in school, so he was adept in the art of make-up.

"Where is Rohan?" Bubbles asked, looking around. "No sign of him."

"I guess he is well-disguised too... Look, here is the second refreshment stall!" Shipra said with an air of discovery.

"And here is a convenient book stall," said Bubbles. "We will be well positioned to keep an eye on things."

She glanced at her watch. "It is a quarter to four. Shipra, I am hungry, I hardly had any lunch. Let us go and have some *puri-alu."*

"I knew you wouldn't want to miss out on that," Shipra said smiling. "But we will have to be really quick."

They made a hasty snack of hot *puri-alu,* served in a leaf plate, then got some drinks.

"Too bad, no *kulhar-ki-chai* around here," Bubbles said, sipping her mango drink. "I can't see anyone even vaguely like Rohan."

Just then a young boy, dressed in a *kurta-pyjama* and a waistcoat, a woollen muffler tied around his head, and incongruous looking dark glasses, went past clearing his throat loudly.

"Did you see?" Shipra clutched at Bubbles's arm. "That was him, Rohan."

"Who? Where?" Bubbles looked around eagerly. "I didn't see him."

"There," Shipra nudged and pointed in Rohan's direction, "that funny-looking fellow with dark glasses."

Rohan was standing near a cart piled high with ripe, yellow bananas, shining red apples and luscious looking oranges. He was, in fact, buying a banana. He began to peel and eat it.

"Oh, him," Bubbles exploded with laughter. "Doesn't he look a sight?"

"Sure does," Shipra agreed.

A tense drama

"Amit has chosen a really good spot. He is just near the bench. Oh," Shipra gasped,"a woman is coming to sit there!"

A woman, with an ungainly walk, was making a bee-line for the bench. She had an untidy bundle under her arm and was swaddled in a shawl which hid most of her face. She sat down on the bench, placing the bundle beside her.

"Now what?" Bubbles asked, adding quickly, "It hardly matters, I guess."

"What if she picks up the brief-case?" Shipra said with a worried frown.

"I am sure those guys are watching out," Bubbles said. "Hey, look at that!" She burst out laughing.

"What is it?" Shipra asked, somewhat annoyed. It was just like Bubbles to get a fit of giggles when something serious was going on. But when she saw what Bubbles had, she could not help laughing too!

It was Spywell – dropping a coin into Amit's tin bowl! Amit accepted it gratefully. No doubt he was showering blessings on him which they were too far away to hear!

Then Shipra tensed. She had seen someone who looked familiar. "It is Rohan's father," she told Bubbles, her voice trembling with excitement.

"Yeah, I can see him, too," Bubbles said, sober now.

They waited with bated breath to see what he would do. Rohan was still standing near the fruit-seller. Just in time, he noticed his father, too, and turned away quickly, pretending to drink water at a tap.

"What a close shave!" Bubbles said, exhaling sharply, as Mr. Kapoor walked past, barely inches away from Rohan.

He lingered for a while amidst the crowd of people standing near the train. Then he glanced at his watch. Shipra looked up at the big station clock – it was just a minute to four o'clock!

Mr. Kapoor walked resolutely towards the bench. He hesitated for a moment on seeing the woman. Then casually he placed the brief-case below the bench, stood there for a couple of minutes before moving away slowly. Soon he disappeared from sight. If he had stood around watching, no one would have picked up the brief-case.

But, Shipra and Bubbles kept their eyes glued to it.

Minutes ticked by slowly, but it continued to lie there. The woman too, remained firmly entrenched on the bench, chewing paan in a leisurely manner.

"Why isn't she getting on the train?" Bubbles whispered suspiciously.

"Perhaps she is waiting for another one," Shipra said.

"Maybe they are not picking it up because she is there," Bubbles said under her breath.

"I don't know," Shipra said uneasily. Had something gone wrong somewhere?

They could see Rohan watching from near the fruit stall. They saw Spywell gulping down tea at the refreshment stall. Amit was at his post. But no one came to take the brief-case.

The train standing at the platform blew its whistle loudly. Slowly, it began to move. People waved to each other and shouted last minute messages. The sound of running feet drew everybody's attention.

"Gosh, he is going to miss the train," Shipra exclaimed.

A man was charging down the platform, suitcase in hand, a bag slung on one shoulder. The train was picking up speed and everyone held their breath as he desperately tried to climb on. One by one the coaches slipped past him, as he wildly attempted to grasp the handrails.

A cheer went up, when he finally made it, with the help of some good samaritans inside the train, who reached out and pulled him in.

With relieved smiles the girls turned their attention back to the brief-case.

"Bubbles!" Shipra gasped, "it is gone!"

"It can't be..." Stupefied, Bubbles gaped at the vacant bench.

The brief-case had disappeared – and the woman!

"Blast! We really goofed!" Bubbles said.

Then the people nearby were astonished by the sight of a beggar springing to his feet and running towards the exit! Shipra and Bubbles ran too; Rohan was already close on Amit's heels. Behind them all, though they did not see him, ran Spywell!

"There! There she is!" Shipra saw the woman climbing up the stairs rapidly, still clutching her bundle. There was no sign of the dark brown brief-case.

Rohan had seen her too, and was making good time, climbing two steps together. Amit was behind him now. But it was impossible to move really fast with the crowd on the stairs.

"He is catching up," Bubbles cried. Rohan was just a couple of steps behind the woman, pushing his way determinedly through the crowd. In a minute he would have caught up. But disaster overtook him – in the form of oranges, bursting out of someone's bag.

"Stop, wait!" the owner cried, trying to retrieve his oranges, which rolled down the stairs, stopping people in their tracks as they tried to sidestep the fruit.

The woman walked away rapidly across the overbridge. Desperately Rohan tried to keep up, jumping over the tumbling oranges and in the process managed to step on a couple, drawing shouts from the angry owner.

Ignoring him, Rohan carried on, followed by Amit, who had caught up with him. Then they all disappeared from view in the crowd – the woman, Amit and Rohan. Pushing, and jostling their way through the masses of people pressing from all sides, Shipra and Bubbles managed to reach the exit. They sprinted down the stairs leading out of the station.

"There!" Bubbles cried, stopping half-way, "there she is."

The woman was climbing into an autorickshaw.

"Bubbles, it is...it is a man," Shipra gasped unbelievingly. Her sharp eyes had glimpsed a pair of man's shoes and trouser-clad legs sticking out below the sari as 'she' got in.

"Yes! It is, it is a man!" Bubbles cried as she saw them too. She gave Shipra a shove. "Hurry!" she said.

Amit and Rohan had reached the spot just in time to see the autorickshaw driving off. They jumped into another one, which was just discharging a fare.

"Now, what do we do?" Shipra said, as the boys also drove off. "We are going to lose them."

Frantically they looked around. There was no vehicle in sight. They would lose too much time if they went to the autorickshaw stand. A car drove up slowly, and as if on cue, Bubbles waved her hand.

"It has stopped. Come on," Shipra said.

They raced to the car. The back door opened and a smiling old lady peered out through gold-rimmed spectacles.

Bubbles said quickly, "We want to catch up with the scooter which just left. Our brothers have gone off, forgetting us behind."

"Oh," the lady raised her eyebrows. "Get in, get in," she invited. "Follow that scooter," she told the driver.

"Oh, our brothers," Bubbles said, shaking her head, as though exasperated. "They are so very absent-minded. They must have been discussing cricket. You know boys, how they are, when they have cricket on their minds. They forget everything."

The old lady nodded and smiled.

"As soon as we catch up, we will get off," Shipra said.

But it did not turn out like that. They had almost caught up with Amit and Rohan at a traffic crossing when the lights changed. The scooter drove away and

the car had to stop.

"Oh, no!" Bubbles cried and Shipra clenched her fists impatiently. She wanted to jump out and chase the scooter!

"Don't worry," the old lady said, "we will catch up."

She began to question them – about their schools, their parents, their hobbies – and got distracted answers. The girls' attention was wholly on the fast disappearing autorickshaw.

"Hurry up," the old lady said, as the lights changed.

They sped on, reducing the distance little by little. Finally, they overtook the scooter and were abreast. Shipra leaned out, waving wildly. After what seemed ages Rohan noticed and asked the driver to stop. The car stopped too, a little ahead and, thanking the lady profusely, Shipra and Bubbles got out and jumped into the autorickshaw.

"Phataphat chalo (move fast)," Amit cried. The scooter jerked forward, almost throwing them out. Shipra caught a glimpse of the lady's inquisitive glance and then her look of open-mouthed horror when she saw the 'brothers' as they hurtled past. They had completely forgotten about their disguises!

"I hope we haven't lost her," Rohan said.

"No, there she is. I can see the woman's sari fluttering out of the back window," Amit said.

"That is not a woman – it is a man," Shipra said.

"A man!" Rohan's eyes widened with surprise.

"She is right," Amit said. "Her walk didn't seem right. Did you see the big strides she took?"

"We noticed her, I mean his shoes when he was climbing into the three-wheeler."

"Where is he going?" Bubbles asked as they reached the trans-Yamuna area.

"We will soon find out," Rohan said. "I must say that was a neat trick they staged. Diverting our

attention with that man..."

"Yes!" Bubbles said. "We only looked away for a second and the brief-case vanished!"

"And I was sitting just next to it," Amit said with disgust. "I do hope we are on the right track."

"It couldn't be anyone else," Shipra said. "The way she, I mean he, disappeared and the brief-case, too."

They were passing through a congested market now and the traffic moved slowly. The scooter they were following turned to the left. So did they.

"What are we going to do when we catch up with him?" Bubbles asked.

"I think he is heading for the hide-out," Amit said. "We will follow him there..."

"Yes, and try to get hold of the money and the plans somehow," Shipra said eagerly.

Going down an extremely busy road they came to another crowded shopping area.

"This is Krishna Nagar," Bubbles said. "I read it on a shop sign."

"Well, at least we know where we are," Amit said.

"We must inform the police," Rohan said, "as soon as we discover the hide-out."

They had turned into a residential area now, with closely-built houses, some in a rundown condition, some garishly painted. Suddenly the scooter in front of them stopped.

"Stop, stop," Shipra said. They did not want the man in front to notice them.

They paid off the scooter, keeping a careful eye on the man who was entering a house through a small gate. They still could not make out his face.

"Can it be Jit Singh?" asked Bubbles.

"I doubt it," Rohan said. "He wouldn't take the risk, I am sure. Besides he came to work today."

"Was he going to drive your father to the station?"

Amit asked.

"No, Dad planned to drive himself this afternoon."

Shipra looked at the house number. "I think it is time to call the police," she said.

"Okay," Amit said. A thought occurred to him. "Listen, why don't you and Bubbles make the call while we watch the house. They may move off elsewhere. In our disguises we can pretend to be loitering about, and no one will suspect."

The hide-out

For a while Amit and Rohan loitered about near the gate. Nothing happened. No one went in or came out of the house.

"I don't think we can find out anything by hanging around here," Amit said impatiently. "Shall we try and see if we can find a way into the house?"

"Uh – huh," Rohan said. "But what about Shipra and Bubbles?"

"I am sure they will catch on. They will guess that we have gone inside."

They pushed open the gate gently, so that it made no noise. There was a car standing outside the house, with half of its paint scraped off. Apparently it was in the process of being repainted.

"From the mechanic's, I bet," Rohan whispered as they crept past.

It was a small house, rather dilapidated. Rain had washed the paint off the walls, leaving them discoloured, with black streaks here and there. The doors and windows badly needed a coat of varnish.

There was a small patch of garden where some straggly grass was trying to grow, not very successfully, together with a few untidy bushes, and a variety

of neglected-looking plants. The windows had solid-looking grills and were all tightly shut. The only way into the house was through the front door which was firmly shut.

"How do we get in?" Amit muttered, after they had tried the door and the windows without success.

"Ring the bell," Rohan said with a laugh.

"Good idea!" said Amit. "I think I will do that."

"Hey, you can't be serious. I was just joking," Rohan said, alarmed. Was Amit out of his mind? They certainly could not ring the bell and walk in!

"Just listen," Amit said. "When we ring the bell someone will come to the door. I will whine and beg for some money. You pick up that stick," he pointed to one lying beneath some bushes, "and stand in that corner. When the man comes out, he won't be able to see you. Then you can knock him out with the stick, and we will sneak in!"

Rohan nodded. Actually he thought it was a pretty wild scheme.

"All set?" Amit asked as Rohan stood, armed with the stick, in a corner to the side of the door.

Boldly Amit rang the bell. After a long time a man opened the door. He was a tall, well-built man, with lots of frizzy hair, a thick beard and a suspicious look in his eyes. When he saw Amit he lost his temper and let loose a string of abuses.

"You *badmash* (rogue)! How dare you ring the bell and disturb me. Get out at once!"

But Amit played his role well, whining in a loud, irritating voice. Rohan, in his corner, waited for an opportunity to bat the man over the head. He never got a chance for not once did the man step out of the door.

Finally, in sheer disgust, the man gave in to Amit's pleas and went into the house to get some money,

leaving the door open. "Quick," Amit hissed, "slip inside."

Rohan darted in at once. He quickly searched for a hiding place. There was not a minute to lose; the man could return any time. There was some vacant space under a staircase, a place where some junk had been dumped. He squeezed in there, covering himself with some sacks he found there and hoped the man would not notice him.

Barely had he managed to conceal himself when the man returned. "Here," he said, flinging some coins at Amit. "Now get lost! And don't you dare show your miserable face here again."

Bolting the door, he went in. Rohan waited a good ten minutes in case he came back. Then he got up, quickly slipped back the bolts and let Amit in. The two of them crept quietly along a short, narrow passage, hoping they would not meet anyone.

"Look!" Rohan said, pointing to a flight of stairs leading down.

"It is a basement!" Amit said. "The windows must be at the back. That is why it is not noticeable from the front."

A murmur of voices came from below.

"They are down there!" Rohan whispered. Scarcely daring to breathe, they sneaked down the stairs.

The voices were louder now. At the side of the stairs, there was some lattice work. Putting a finger to his lips, Amit tiptoed up to it and peeped through one of the holes. He stifled a gasp. "There is a man there, all tied up," he mouthed, pointing towards the basement.

Rohan too peeped through the lattice work. "It is Satish Kumar. I see Jit Singh too!" he exclaimed.

"Which one?" Amit asked, tingling with suppressed excitement. Besides Satish Kumar there were three

other men in the room. One was the curly haired man who had opened the door, another a short fellow who had his back to them, while the third was of medium height, with sunken eyes and a beak-like, prominent nose, which somehow gave him the look of a bird of prey.

"The one facing us," Rohan muttered, "not the curly haired one."

The men seemed to be having some kind of an argument.

"I say we should all get an equal share of the money," Curly said gruffly.

"Ha, ha, very fine," Jit Singh replied scornfully. "Whose idea was it? Would there be any money if I hadn't suggested it to you? I have even risked my job."

"We too have taken risks," the third man said. "The money should be divided equally."

"And will be," broke in Curly threateningly. "We are two against one, remember that!"

For a long moment, Jit Singh and Curly glared at each other angrily.

"Okay," Jit Singh said sullenly, "but we should move out as fast as we can from here. Kapoor has hired a detective I heard. He might have followed you."

"And the plan?" Curly asked.

"We are not sending it back," Jit Singh said, with an evil grin. "We can get more money for it."

"But Mr. Saroop refused to buy it," the third man said. "He wanted to have a look at it first."

"Never," Jit Singh said. "He will look at it and copy it, and then say he doesn't want it. There is another party in Bombay who might be interested."

Rohan's face went red with anger. "The cheating crook,'' he muttered. "He never meant to return it. He is a real criminal."

Curly and the other man shook hands gleefully, their frowns replaced by broad smiles now. They slapped Jit Singh on the back.

"What about him?" Curly jabbed a thumb in Satish Kumar's direction.

The man had been sitting dispiritedly all this time, tied to a chair, while the crooks made their plans. His confinement seemed to have worn him out. He was in terrible shape, unshaven, gaunt, with his hair in disarray and his clothes dirty and crumpled.

Now he looked up anxiously. "Please let me go," he pleaded. "Your secret is safe with me. No one will ever come to know."

"Shut up," Jit Singh said roughly, "or we will gag you."

Suddenly Amit felt an irresistible tickle in his nose; a sneeze was building up. No, no, he had to stop it! Desperate, he tried to hold his breath, gulped, covered his face with his hands. But in vain.

"*A – chhoo, a – chhoo*!" Amit sneezed loudly.

There was instant silence. The men looked around, startled and supicious. Amit and Rohan gaped at each other, horrified.

"Run!" Amit cried and they scrambled up the stairs and charged down the passage. Swift-footed Rohan took no time to reach the door and could have escaped if he had not stopped and waited for the slower Amit. By then, Curly had already pounced on Amit.

"Run!" Amit cried again, as Rohan still hesitated. But by that time Jit Singh had caught up too and got hold of him. The two boys were dragged to the basement.

"So it is you!" shouted Curly, shaking Amit like a rat.

Amit would have laughed had they not been in a predicament. The man genuinely thought that he was

a beggar who had broken in to steal! Unfortunately, the illusion did not last long.

"Wait a minute," Jit Singh said slowly, pulling Rohan into the light and staring hard at him.

Rohan pulled his hand away and stubbornly looked the other way. It was useless – he had already been recognised. Jit Singh slapped his thigh and laughed loudly, *"Arre bhai,* we have caught a big fish. Now we are going to strike it rich!" He laughed again in an unpleasant manner.

"Rohan," cried Satish Kumar recognising him, "what are you doing here?"

Rohan did not answer.

"Who are these two?" the short man asked.

Amit now recognised him as the man whom he had seen outside Mr. Saroop's office. "One thing I know, I have never seen such a well-fed beggar!" He too laughed.

Amit flushed angrily but kept quiet.

"Let me introduce you," said Jit Singh. "This is Mr. Kapoor's only son, Rohan, and this is his friend."

"Ach – chha," Curly said slowly. "How did they get here?"

"Who cares? They will help to make us more rich," Jit Singh replied with a snigger. "Now we can demand ransom for these two as well as another fat sum for the plan. *Kya kismat hai* (what luck)!"

"You won't get away with it, you *badmash*!" yelled Rohan. "The police have been informed and will be here any minute."

"Will they?" said the short one. "Very kind of you to inform us. Kale, get cracking," he said to Curly.

Rohan bit his lip, annoyed at his mistake. Swiftly, Kale bound their hands and gagged them. The short man, whose name was Bhallu, quickly disappeared up the stairs, to check if the coast was clear.

"Bring them!" he yelled after a while. Jit Singh and Kale hustled the boys out, struggling and kicking, into the car standing outside. Satish Kumar was also brought out and shoved inside and the car drove off.

The girls to the rescue

It was a fairly long walk to the market from the house. But when Shipra and Bubbles got there they were able to find a phone without much difficulty, and get through to the police. They paid for the call and began to walk back.

"Do you think they will come soon?" Bubbles asked.

"I wonder," Shipra said with a sigh. "That man didn't sound very convinced. Let us hope they do or the crooks might get away."

Quickening their pace, they walked back, wondering how the boys had fared. They were mystified to see Rohan and Amit nowhere in sight.

"Where could they have gone?" Bubbles asked, worried. "Do you think they have been caught?"

"I hope not!" Shipra said. "Let us look around. They could be hiding somewhere."

It was beginning to grow dark now, and the wind was bitingly cold. The girls were thankful for their warm jackets.

Looking around carefully, in case anyone was watching, they went up to the door and tried it. It was firmly closed. Amit had bolted it after him.

Thud! A sound, as though something had slammed itself violently against the door, startled them. They stepped back hurriedly. There were more thuds and shouts from inside the house.

"Shipra, something is going on inside," Bubbles whispered.

"Hide quickly, someone may come out," Shipra said in a tone of urgency.

They quickly concealed themselves behind the car.

"I think it was Amit and Rohan," Shipra said. "I could hear their voices. They must have managed to get in, but got caught."

"What do we do now?" asked Bubbles.

"We have to try and rescue them," Shipra said. "Somehow."

They froze when they heard the door opening. There were footsteps and a voice yelled out, "Bring them."

"They must be taking them away somewhere in the car!" Shipra said. "We have to follow them."

"The boot!" Bubbles said. "Let us hide in the boot of the car. Quick! Before they come."

Cautiously they tried the boot. It was not locked. Raising the cover, they slipped in and quickly shut it. They were barely inside, when the men came out again.

* * *

Amit and Rohan were pushed onto the back seat of the car. Kale sat in between. Satish Kumar sat in front between the other two.

Kale looked at Amit and Rohan threateningly and said, "No funny tricks." He flicked open a dangerous-looking knife. "See this, I won't hesitate to use it."

Jit Singh started the car and they drove off. Both Amit and Rohan thought of trying to open the door and throwing themselves out. But it was a next to impossible task, with their hands tied behind them, not to speak of the watchful Kale and his knife. Being gagged they could not even shout and attract attention. However, they kept an eye on the road signs and

other landmarks, so that they could get an idea of where they were going.

They drove through a succession of crowded localities, busy markets, congested traffic, past a check-post with rows of trucks blocking half the road. Desperately Amit wished someone would notice them. But no one seemed to. They drove right past a police check-post without anyone noticing.

'We are probably going out of the city,' Rohan thought noticing the signs. It had become quite dark and it was hard to make out anything. They had crossed a suburb and continued to drive on. The roads were not crowded. They were in the open countryside, with fields on either side, dimly visible in the gathering gloom.

Suddenly they turned off the main road on to a bumpy dirt road, which was absolutely deserted. The boys' hearts sank. It would be hard to get away from there. The road wound between fields and came to a lonely house standing amidst some shady trees. At a distance some lights twinkled dimly. Probably a village, Amit thought, wondering how far it was.

The car stopped. The men stepped out. The captives were pulled out roughly and hauled into the house, a drab, functional structure. A man came out of the house. He was tall and thin, with a short, stubby haircut and a drooping moustache which he stroked constantly. He wore a dirty *kurta-pyjama,*. He conversed with Jit Singh in a corner and the three captives were bundled into a bare room, and the door shut on them.

Shipra and Bubbles longed to get out of the boot. It was dusty and reeked of petrol, and they could hardly breathe, not to speak of being so cramped that they could scarcely move a finger! The bumps and jolts, specially towards the end of the journey.

had really made their bones ache! But they did not dare get out, in case one of the men returned for something.

After a while Bubbles whispered, "I think it is safe now. Let us get out."

"My legs don't seem to want to straighten out!" Shipra said trying to stand up.

"Neither do mine," Bubbles said.

It was so dark that they could not see each other's faces clearly. If they could, they would have got a real shock! Both girls were covered with dust and black smudges of grease streaked their faces and clothes.

"Where are we?" Bubbles asked, looking around her.

"Out in the countryside somewhere," Shipra said.

Like the boys they noticed that the house stood all alone, amidst the fields. The crooks had chosen well — it was far away from the village. No one would notice what was going on in the house.

"We must find out where Amit and Rohan have been taken," Shipra said.

"Yes, let us sneak around and see if we can discover anything."

They crept stealthily towards the back of the house. It was absolutely dark now. Voices drifted out from an open window. Shipra stood on her toes and peeped in cautiously, then ducked quickly. The crooks were drinking in there! In her haste she stepped on Bubbles's toes, who could not suppress a sudden exclamation.

One of the men caught the sound. "What was that?" he said, immediately alert.

"What?" asked another.

"I heard a sound. There is someone outside."

"Nonsense," replied the other. "Who could it be? Must be some goats nibbling at the bushes. Come

on, have another drink."

But the first man was not satisfied. He got up and came to the window and peeped out. It was a dark, moonless night, so he could not see or hear anything apart from crickets chirping.

"Who is it?" he called out.

Shipra and Bubbles crouched low beneath the window, hearts thudding painfully, scarcely daring to breathe.

"I could have sworn I heard a sound," the man muttered.

"Come on," called the other, "stop imagining things." One of them began to sing tunelessly, banging on the table for accompaniment.

"What an escape!" Bubbles breathed, as the man turned away from the window reluctantly. They too moved on as silently as they could, still crouching against the wall.

A dim light shone out of the next window they came across, though the shutters were tightly shut. More carefully this time, they peered through the panes. But the room seemed bare. Disappointed, they moved on again.

Little did Shipra and Bubbles know that Amit and Rohan were actually in that room. The window happened to be somewhat high up on the wall. The two boys along with Satish Kumar were seated on mats on the floor, leaning against the wall, under the window. So the room had appeared empty to the girls.

The gags in their mouths did not allow the boys to speak. But they had been trying hard to loosen their bonds. They had moved close and were trying to untie each other. It was a near impossible task. The ropes had been knotted tightly and bit painfully into their wrists. Besides, their hands were numb from being tied up and could barely be moved. Rohan

finally managed to get a grip on Amit's bonds and had opened the first knot when they heard the latch grating. Immediately they sprang apart.

It was Bhallu. "Hmm, sitting quietly," he said, then laughed. "What else can you do, anyway? Here is some food for you," he said. "I will untie you and let you eat one by one." He removed Satish Kumar's gag first and untied his hands. Behind him came a small girl carrying *thalis* (plates) of food.

"When are you letting me go?" Satish Kumar asked, as soon as the gag was removed.

"Quiet," said Bhallu. "We will release you when it is convenient for us. Eat your food."

With a gesture of despair, Satish Kumar turned to the food. He quickly swallowed a few mouthfuls, then pushed the *thali* away.

Bhallu shrugged and tied his hands again. He did not gag him.

Next it was Rohan's turn. "I don't want any food," he said angrily. "Let us go or you will be sorry."

The man's eyes narrowed. "Okay, starve if you wish," he said. "You will sing a different tune tomorrow. What about you?" he turned to Amit.

Amit was hungry. The food, though simple, looked appetising. He nodded to indicate that he would eat.

The small girl placed the *thali* in front of him. Her eyes widened in surprised recognition. Little did Amit know that the girl was Mohini, who used to work in Shipra's house. She glanced fearfully at Bhallu in case he had noticed her reaction — he had not. Quietly she picked up the other *thalis* and left.

Amit ate well. The thick chapatis made of coarse flour, and the curry, though spicy, tasted good. "Not bad," he told Rohan. "You should have had some. To keep up your strength." He winked meaningfully.

Rohan made a face. The last thing he wanted to

think about was food. At the moment he was only bothered about escape. He marvelled at Amit's appetite, under the circumstances.

Escape

As they crept around the house trying to find the boys, Shipra and Bubbles came to a paved courtyard. On one side was a hand-pump; apparently the place was used for washing dishes, because they could see some lying there. Facing it was a small verandah into which a couple of doors opened.

"Maybe we can find a way inside from here," Shipra said. "Come along."

But as they entered the dimly-lit verandah, someone came out from one of the rooms! They froze — trying to merge into the shadows, hoping they would not be noticed. But the other person stopped too, peered at them, and slowly began to move towards them.

"Let us run for it," Bubbles muttered. Before they could, a voice said, "*Didi!*"

Shipra was flabbergasted. The voice sounded familiar — but out of place. "Mohini!" she exclaimed, recognising the girl. "What are you doing here?"

Mohini put a finger to her lips and motioned them to move into the shadows. Just in time. A loud voice called out insistently, "Mohini! Mohini! where are you?" and a man came out into the verandah.

"Who were you talking to?" he asked suspiciously. Shipra and Bubbles could not see him.

"No one," Mohini said hurriedly. "It was just a stray dog who comes for scraps."

"Don't encourage him," growled the man. "And what are you doing here, playing with stray dogs when we are waiting for water. Bring it quickly."

"Achchhaji." Mohini ran inside at once. Casting a last suspicious glance around, the man followed her into the house.

The two girls waited anxiously in the shadows, hoping Mohini would be back soon.

"What a piece of luck finding Mohini here. She will be a great help," Shipra whispered.

"Yeah," Bubbles said, "but how did she get here?"

"Remember, her mother told us she had sent her away," Shipra said, recalling.

Mohini came out again after what seemed like hours.

"We are here," Shipra whispered, noticing her searching for them in the dark.

Looking back cautiously, Mohini came up to them. *"Didi,"* she said, "they have captured Amit *bhaiya* and two others."

"Yes," Shipra said. "We are trying to rescue them. But what are you doing here?"

"My mother sent me here to work for a distant relative. This is his house. He said he would pay well. But he is a bad uncle, *didi,"* she said, fear in her voice. "He does all sorts of wrong things. And today I got a real shock on seeing Amit *bhaiya."*

"Can you help us?" Bubbles asked Mohini.

"Of course, *didi.* What do you want me to do?"

"Help us free the boys. Where are they?"

"Locked in one of the rooms."

"Is there any way you can let them out?" Shipra asked. "Or help us to get in? I don't want you to get into trouble."

"Don't worry, *didi,* I will be able to do it. They have locked the door and the key is with Bhallu, the short one. But I will try and get hold of it."

"Aren't there any windows through which we can get in?" Shipra asked. "We don't want you to take

unneccessary risks."

"Don't worry about me. I will manage," Mohini said. "I think I had better go before they come looking for me. You wait here."

She ran off. 'How can I get the key,' thought Mohini. She had noticed that Bhallu, after locking the door, had kept the key in the pocket of his pants. Her mind began to work furiously as she thought of possible ways of getting hold of the key. 'I will just have to wait for them to sleep,' she thought, 'and then try to remove the key from Bhallu's pocket.' That meant a long wait as the men were getting quite merry and showed no signs of having their dinner, leave alone going to bed.

Someone yelled for more water and Mohini hurried to get it. As she placed the jug of water on the table, an idea exploded in her mind. Something so simple, she was surprised she had not thought of it earlier. Something that would not arouse suspicion at all.

Putting down the heavy jug of water, Mohini managed to knock it over, so that the water fell all over Bhallu, drenching him thoroughly.

"Clumsy creature!" he cried, jumping up angrily, "look what you have done."

Mohini's display of fear was quite real. "I am sorry," she said, shrinking back, as though she expected to be slapped. "I did it by mistake. Please excuse me."

"Idiot," said her uncle, eyes red with rage. "Can't you see what you are doing?"

"Stop making such a fuss," said Jit Singh, who was in a very good mood. "Give him a lungi or something and dry the pants outside. It is only water."

Mohini felt a rush of elation. Her plan was working perfectly.

"Go," said her uncle, pushing her, "bring one of

my lungis."

She ran and got one. Bhallu snatched it from her, and grumbling all the while, changed into it. He flung the pants at Mohini. She took them and hurried out.

Once out of the room, she glanced back to check in case any of the men were following her, then felt the pockets of the pants. The key was there in one of them.

She ran to the room where Amit, Rohan and Satish Kumar were held captive. Quickly she opened the lock! The three prisoners looked up in surprise as she entered the room. "Hurry," she said, "run away fast before they catch you."

It took a while for the three to register the fact that she was helping them to escape. Amit asked her to untie their hands.

"No time," she said in a voice strained with urgency. "Hurry!"

Awkwardly, they shuffled out of the room. Swiftly Mohini locked it again, lest one of the men should notice. Then she led the three out to where Shipra and Bubbles were waiting. She hung the pants on the clothes-line, then ran for a knife to cut their bonds.

"Let us get away fast, before they notice we are gone," said Satish Kumar, as soon as he was free.

"But the brief-cases," Rohan said. "What about them? We have to get them back."

"I don't know if we have a chance," Amit said doubtfully. "There are four of them and they have knives. We should get the police, I think."

"Mohini," Shipra said, "come along with us. You will be in awful trouble. They will definitely catch on that you helped us."

"No, *didi*," Mohini replied. "If I come along they will notice at once and try to catch you again. If I am around, they won't realise for some time."

"I am going," Satish Kumar said. "I don't want to be caught again. You can stand here arguing if you like!" He had been standing there twisting his hands nervously while the children talked in whispers. It had been a gruelling experience for him and he was jittery. He only wanted to get away from there somehow. He stumbled off into the darkness, leaving the children behind.

"Come on, Mohini," Bubbles urged. "It is too risky for you to stay."

"No, *didi*," said Mohini decisively. "Go quickly or it will be of no use. I will try to get away when they go to sleep. I am going now, someone is calling." She rushed off, before they could even thank her for her help.

"I must say, she has guts," Rohan said.

"Those men will really give it to her if they find out," Shipra said, worried.

"Come on, let us move," Amit said, "or her effort will be wasted. Most probably they won't discover our escape till morning."

As silently as they could, they crept around to the front of the house towards the road. Sounds of revelry floated out through the open window as they slipped past. Noticing the car, Bubbles stopped suddenly as a thought struck her. "The tyres!" she said. "Hey, listen, let us deflate the tyres. That will slow them down for sure if they discover we are gone."

Shipra suppressed a giggle. The idea appealed heartily to all of them. Swiftly and silently they let out the air from all four tyres and then made a run for it!

"I have an idea," Amit said. "Why don't we get help from the village? The main road is a long way off. And where will we get transport at this hour, in the middle of nowhere?"

"Yes," Rohan agreed, "the village is our best bet. Won't it be fun to surprise those crooks?"

The idea perked them up considerably, exhausted as they were by the events of the day. They trudged on determinedly towards the distant lights. At least, they knew the crooks would not be able to chase them in a hurry.

Help

Mohini had said someone was calling her, so that the four would leave quickly. Inwardly she was terrified she would be discovered. Her uncle was a violent man. She had experienced the edge of his temper more than once. But she knew that if she left, the escape would be discovered much sooner. So she bravely stuck on.

The men were still drinking and making merry when she went back inside. Sitting wearily in a corner of the kitchen, she had almost dozed off when she heard them yelling for food. She jumped to her feet at once. As she began to serve them, Bhallu suddenly exclaimed with a start, "The key!"

Mohini paled. For a moment she did not know how to react. Then she realised it would look suspicious if she showed no interest in his question. So she stopped serving, and stood there trying to maintain a look of innocent curiosity.

The others looked up suspiciously.

"What is it?"asked Jit Singh.

"The key," Bhallu said, "the key to the room — it was in the pocket of my pants!" He looked at Mohini distrustfully.

"Ass!" Kale said disgustedly. "Leaving that key in your pants!"

"Get them, get my pants at once," Bhallu blustered, conscious of his slip.

"B — but, they are still wet," Mohini stammered,

trying to buy time. If he decided to open the door and check up...

"Go!" Bhallu thundered.

Mohini shot out of the room at once. The men stopped eating and waited, tense.

"What is the matter, *bhai?*" Mohini's uncle asked in an ingratiating tone, trying to calm them down. "Nothing will happen to the key. The girl is my relative. She is reliable."

"Shut up," growled Kale. "He should not have let the key out of his sight."

Just then Mohini appeared with the pants, which were still sodden. Cursing under his breath, Bhallu searched the pockets. When he pulled out the key there was an audible sigh of relief. Bhallu grinned, showing broken yellow teeth. "Okay!" he said, "take it back."

But Kale was still annoyed at Bhallu's carelessness. "Go, check up on them," he said.

"Why should I?" Bhallu replied, shovelling food into his mouth. "You go." Both men had had a lot to drink and were spoiling for a fight.

Heart in mouth, Mohini stood there, waiting. Should she make a run for it? She would be lost if they went and checked up.

Jit Singh was enjoying the quarrel between the two men. It was in his interest if they fought. He had intended to corner the lion's share of the loot. When the two had protested violently, he had pretended to agree but he planned to keep the major share, somehow. Maybe if they got rid of Kale...He decided to provoke him further by siding with Bhallu who was not as quarrelsome, or clever.

"Let it be," he said to Kale. "You are always fighting. Where can they go? The door is locked, their hands are tied. We will see in the morning."

To his surprise, Kale, as though guessing his real

intentions, gave in tamely. He shrugged sulkily and returned to his food.

Mohini hid her relief by busying herself in picking up the empty dishes. Her hands were trembling so, she almost dropped them. She quickly left the room before she gave herself away. She realised she would have to escape before the men awoke in the morning.

* * *

"Gosh! This is endless. I do hope we are going in the right direction," Bubbles said, as they plodded down the dusty road.

It was almost pitch dark and they could not walk very fast. The cold night air was biting and they shivered when cold gusts of wind blew, making even the girls' warm jackets ineffective. It was worse for Rohan and Amit who were not dressed warmly enough.

The winding track was not only dusty, but full of pot-holes. Shipra had stepped into one and almost twisted her ankle.

Sugarcane fields on either side of the road gave them a peculiar shut-in feeling. Once or twice they heard a startled animal darting among the cane, making Bubbles suppress a scream.

"I think we are almost there," Shipra said. "I can hear some sounds."

"What sounds?" Amit hooted. "You are just imagining things. I can't hear anything."

"Wait a minute," Bubbles said. "I think I can hear them, too."

"Whatever it is," Rohan said, "we have to keep walking till we reach the village. Can't we speed up?"

They did try to walk faster. Suddenly it seemed to grow brighter. "Hey," Rohan cried, "aren't those houses?"

A little ahead of them they could see roofs outlined against the sky. There were no more endless fields of sugarcane. Elated, they quickened their pace and found themselves stumbling along a village lane.

"Now what?" Bubbles asked.

"Now we knock on somebody's door," Shipra said.

The village was absolutely silent. The hour was late and people had long since turned in. Stepping up to the nearest house, Rohan reached out and rattled the iron latch on the door. There was no answer. Everyone seemed to be sound asleep. They rattled the latch repeatedly and banged the door.

Chottu Ram was sleeping peacefully when a horrible rattling sound forced him awake. Who could it be at this late hour? Only dacoits would disturb an honest man in the middle of the night, he thought, a chill settling around his heart. Wrapping his blanket around his tall, gaunt frame, he grasped his stout *lathi* (stick).

"*Kaun hai* (who is it)?" he asked sharply, banging his *lathi* on the ground to show that he too was armed and capable of protecting himself!

"Open the door," a high-pitched voice called out. "We need help!"

It did not sound like dacoits at all, but still, Chottu Ram thought, they might be using children to trick honest villagers to open up.

"What help?" he asked.

He heard a murmur of voices, then someone shouted, "There are some criminals hiding in a house — the far-off one, standing all by itself outside the village. They kidnapped us but we escaped. Please help us to catch them!"

Little did the children know that the mention of the house decided Chottu Ram. Mohini's uncle Dhani Ram was hated in the village, not only because of his criminal activities, but also because of his arrogant nature.

Chottu Ram opened the door and heard their story. Knowing that he would get plenty of help once people knew this was a chance to nab Dhani Ram, he banged on a few doors with his *lathi*. He soon had a group of enthusiastic men armed with *lathis* and sickles. They would be glad to see Dhani Ram behind bars and his companions with him. For years he had troubled the villagers and now they had a chance to get even with him.

The way back did not seem as long with the villagers lighting the way with lanterns and flashlights.

* * *

The men had fallen into a drunken stupor. After they finished eating and washed up, they yelled for quilts and dropped off to sleep. Mohini retired to her little string cot. She was thankful they had not talked about checking up on their captives again.

She lay there sleepless, wondering whether she should leave right then or early in the morning before the men awoke. The idea of going through the dark, lonely fields all alone did not appeal to her. But it was too risky to wait till the morning. She decided to let the men fall into a really sound sleep and then make a move.

Time passed slowly. Unwittingly Mohini dozed off. She suddenly awoke with a start, remembering what she had to do. She got up, shivering.

Gently she inched the door open lest it creaked and gave her away, then tiptoed out through the back verandah. She was almost out of the house when she remembered the brief-cases! One of the boys had been talking about the brief-cases. She had noticed one in the room the men had been sitting. She knew it contained something important because the children had

wanted to take it with them. Maybe she could get it for them. She knew when the crooks awoke and found their prisoners had flown, their first move would be to flee themselves, knowing their game was up. It would be hard to track them and recover the brief-case. 'I must get it,' she thought resolutely.

The thought of going into the room and picking up the brief-case was rather daunting. Suppose one of the men awoke? No, she thought, they had had so much to drink. They must be really sound asleep. She was quite used to seeing her father sleep off one of his drunken bouts. It would take something really shattering to wake them up.

Caught

As stealthily as a cat, Mohini crept into the room in which the men were sleeping. It resounded with their snores! 'Thank god,' she thought, 'they seem to be sleeping soundly.'

Her eyes had got accustomed to the darkness now. She looked around for the brief-case. There it was — she could make out the shape dimly. There was one problem. One of the men was sprawled out next to it, on the floor. To get to the brief-case, she would have to step right over him.

For a moment she hesitated. It was a tricky business. Then, holding her breath, she stepped over him gingerly and picked up the brief-case. It felt quite heavy. She did not know that it was packed with hundred rupee notes! As she was stepping back carefully, the man suddenly turned over in his sleep, knocking her down.

Crash! Mohini fell right over him and the brief-case slipped from her hand, falling with a heavy thud!

Uttering a sharp exclamation, the man sat up.

Quickly Mohini rolled away and tried to get up and slip out of the room. It was quite dark and she thought she could make it to the door and out, before he realised what was happening.

But the man was more alert than she had thought. His hand shot out and grasped her arm, before she could get to her feet.

"Who are you? What are you doing?" Kale asked, his voice blurred and heavy with sleep.

"Nothing, nothing," Mohini said, trying to wriggle out of his grasp. "I had left something here."

"Oh — h, it is you," he said, recognising her voice. "What were you doing?" Sounding suspicious now, he felt for the brief-case with his other hand. "Where is it, the brief-case?" His voice rose threateningly.

One of the other men murmured in his sleep, disturbed by his loud voice.

"Did you hear me?" Kale shook her arm roughly, his eyes gleaming angrily in the darkness at her. "What have you done with it?"

"I — I don't know what you are talking about," Mohini stammered. She could only save herself by acting ignorant.

"What is going on?" Jit Singh muttered irritably. "Can't you let us sleep?"

"Sleep then," Kale said mockingly. "Keep on sleeping and let her go off with the brief-case."

"The brief-case!" Jit Singh was wide awake now. "What happened to the brief-case?"

"I caught this girl snooping around and the brief-case is missing."

"So, you know about the brief-case! Who told you, hunh? Tell us, or you will be sorry!" Jit Singh suspected that her uncle had set her up to it. "Let us have some light," he said, "and wake up that cheating Dhani Ram."

Striking a match, Kale lit a lantern. Bhallu sat up groggily, rubbing his eyes. They shook Mohini's uncle rudely awake.

"Get up! See what your dear niece has been up to! Reliable girl, you said, hunh!" Kale said accusingly.

"Wh — what has she done?" her uncle said sleepily, not understanding what it was all about.

"What has she done?" mimicked Jit Singh. "You crook, you told her to steal the brief-case! Did you think you would get away with it?"

"Steal the brief-case?" What are you talking about? She doesn't know anything about the brief-case."

"Then why did she try to remove it while we were sleeping?" Jit Singh replied.

"Did she do that? Tell me, girl, did you do that? How did you know about the brief-case?" Her uncle looked positively ferocious.

"But the brief-case is lying here," Bhallu said. It had landed near him, when it fell.

"It slipped from her hand and fell there," Kale said. "Wait a minute," he said, as an idea struck him. "Give me the key. This girl has been behaving peculiarly all this time...may be..." He snatched the key from Bhallu and rushed out.

Mohini shivered. Now she would be in real trouble. But she decided to put up a brave front, hoping help would arrive fast.

"They have gone! They have vanished! This girl let them go!"

"You wretch! What have you done," her uncle cried, almost going berserk. "Believe me, I have nothing to do with this!" he said to Jit Singh. "Where have they gone? Tell me or I will give you such a hammering you will never forget for the rest of your life."

"Touch me, if you dare, uncle," Mohini said. The normally timid girl was astonished at her own daring,

but something told her that it would go badly for her if she showed fear. "They have gone to call the police and they will be here any minute. You will all be put in jail," she ended defiantly.

"Ungrateful girl!" Her uncle took a swipe at her which she ducked deftly. The fact that the others suspected him too, enraged him more.

"Listen," Jit Singh said, "if they have gone, they have gone. We have still got the money and the plans. That is more important. Let us leave immediately, there is no time to lose."

They rushed to the car taking the brief-case. At first they did not discover the deflated tyres. It was too dark to see. When they had all got in, dragging a kicking and screaming Mohini inside, Jit Singh started the car. The wheels churned, making a peculiar sound. Grumbling, Jit Singh got out to check.

"The tyres!" he cried, "they are all flat!"

The others scrambled out too.

"Those rascals!" Kale said, clenching his fists in futile rage.

For a second they stood there indecisively, trying to decide what to do. But the next few moments found their decision made for them.

The rescue group had been approaching the house when they heard the screams.

"Mohini!" Shipra cried. "They have got hold of her, I am sure." She sprang forward, rushing ahead of the others. She had to save Mohini from the crooks. She was heading for the house when she noticed the car's headlights. "They are here!" she yelled, pointing towards the car.

"The police!" Kale cried, hearing her voice. "They have come. Run!"

Helter-skelter the crooks ran in all directions, forgetting Mohini, forgetting the brief-case, wanting

only to save themselves. All except Jit Singh. He made a last minute dive for the brief-case which was inside the car. Guessing his intentions, Mohini caught hold of him from the back, hoping to delay him till help arrived.

Jit Singh tried to shake her off but Mohini clung on till a panting Shipra ran up. The two girls kept the struggling man pinned down, till the villagers appeared on the scene and took him into their custody.

With loud shouts and yells and brandishing of *lathis*, they chased the others who were running away. Dhani Ram and Bhallu were quickly captured, but Kale managed to escape under cover of darkness.

Shipra handed the brief-case to Rohan. "Here you are," she said, "we have managed to get it back, finally."

Rohan accepted it, smiling. Then he suddenly remembered something. "The other one," he said, "the one with the plans," he said. "We must get that back, too."

Amit turned to Jit Singh, who stood there sullenly, flanked by two sturdy villagers. "Where is it?" he asked. "The brief-case with the plans?"

Jit Singh scowled but made no reply.

"You might as well tell us," Bubbles said. "You can't do anything about it now!"

The man's face darkened with anger, but he kept silent.

Then Chottu Ram stepped in. "Are you going to tell them or not?" he said, banging his *lathi* on the ground. "You had better, or else..."

Jit Singh got the message. He pointed reluctantly to the boot of the car. "In there..." he said.

The boot was opened at once. One of the villagers shone a torch and there, dirty but intact, was the navy blue brief-case, concealed under a spare wheel!

"Oh gosh!" Shipra and Bubbles exclaimed, when it was discovered. To think of it! All that time it had been bumping around with them and they did not even suspect that it was there.

The crooks were marched into the house and securely bound with ropes. They were locked up in the very room that Amit and Rohan had been kept!

"Serves them right," Amit said.

"We must get the police now," Shipra said, "and think of getting home. Our parents must be really worried."

"Gosh, yes," Bubbles said, "they must be frantic! But listen, who is this?"

Headlights flashed through the darkness and a jeep jerked to a stop. Uniformed men leapt out, guided by a bleary-eyed, unshaven man in crumpled clothes.

Satish Kumar had returned — accompanied by the arm of law!

When he had walked off so hurriedly, Satish Kumar had thought that the children would automatically follow him. But when he had walked a considerable distance and they did not appear, he had begun to worry. At first he had thought of retracing his steps and going back to find them. Then he realised it would be better to go ahead quickly and inform the police. It had been a long walk to the main road, specially in his exhausted condition, but he had made it. He was lucky enough to get a lift in a truck at once, which dropped him at the police station in the next town.

There he had a problem convincing the policeman on duty of the urgency of the matter. His appearance was so disreputable that they did not pay much attention to him. It was only after some judicious name-dropping that he was able to get them to accompany him to the village.

The police found their work already done for them. They had only to take charge of the prisoners. Kale was, of course, still at large. But he would be caught later.

The villains were carted off to the lock-up and the children, after thanking the kind villagers profusely, were dropped home along with the two brief-cases, where their anxious parents awaited them.

Answering questions

"I can't believe it is all over, and we are actually sitting here again," Shipra said, cracking a peanut shell.

Bubbles, Shipra and Amit had got together in his *barsati*. It was a clear, sunny day, cold and crisp, and they were munching freshly-roasted peanuts.

"Yes," Amit said, "it all seems like a dream. Did we actually help to catch those tough characters? That house, that village, do they really exist?"

"And Chottu Ram," Bubbles said with a giggle. "Remember the way he banged his *lathi* and frightened that nasty Jit Singh!"

"Hi folks," a cheery voice called and Rohan appeared at the door.

"Hullo," the other three greeted him. "We have been waiting for you."

They were meeting after two days. It was two days since those exciting events had taken place, the capture of the crooks and the recovery of the brief-cases. Two whole days which they had spent entirely at home. One day was spent just sleeping, they had been so utterly, absolutely exhausted. It had hit them only when they got home. Shipra, in fact had fallen asleep while Bubbles was relating the whole

story to Shipra's parents, and to Pooja and Nidhi, who had all listened spellbound.

As for Amit's mother, she had got a real shock. It was hard for her to recognise the filthy, dishevelled character who turned up late at night as her son! And Rohan, he had been simply overwhelmed at the fuss that was made over him at home when he got back.

That night, when the children did not return home, all the parents had been frantic with worry. But what made it worse for Rohan's parents were their feelings of guilt that they had neglected him so much.

"I am not going to let you out of my sight," his mother had said when he returned home.

"Come on, Mummy, you will have to let me go to school occasionally," Rohan had said jokingly. But it had given him a warm feeling to know that his parents had been so concerned and worried about him.

And of course, the praise that had been showered on them from all quarters made them feel ten feet tall. Their parents, the police, everyone who heard about it had been full of compliments.

"Dad said that we left silly old Spywell and even the police far behind!" Rohan said.

Yes, Spywell had been a dismal failure. What did happen to him? We last met him at the railway station, running after the girls, who were running after Amit and Rohan, who were running after the woman with the bundle. And who was the woman with the bundle? It was Bhallu, the shortest of the crooks. He had cleverly concealed the brief-case inside the bundle. And the man running for the train had been Dhani Ram, who had conveniently got off at the next station and made his way to the village.

Spywell had guessed that the girls had a lead and were chasing the person who they suspected had

picked up the brief-case. He had followed them out of the station and just managed to see them getting into a car. Like a good detective he had taken down the number. He had quickly mounted his scooter, and followed the car promptly.

He had been able to keep up pretty well and was close behind them when they stopped at the red light. But after that luck had deserted him. The car had speeded up and overtaken a big, lumbering truck and shot ahead. Spywell had tried to follow suit but a tempo had blocked the way. It was much later, after a lot of frantic manoeuvring that Spywell was able to get ahead. He had been highly relieved when he was able to spot the car again. Steadily, he kept on its trail, when to his surprise, the car made an about turn. He followed it determinedly, till overcome by a nagging doubt, he decided to pull up alongside. Then he got a real shock. There was only an old lady sitting primly in the car, and not a sign of the girls!

Spywell's head was in a whirl! Where had they disappeared? The only thing left to do was to return and report to Rohan's father, who was waiting at home for some news. Not only from Spywell, but also some word from the crooks about returning the plans.

"Do you know," Rohan said, "Spywell blamed you both — Shipra and Bubbles — for throwing him off the track?"

"How did we do that?" Bubbles asked, puzzled.

"When you left the car and got into the auto-rickshaw, he lost sight of you and did not come to know. So he continued to follow the car till he realised you were not there!"

"Oh, no!" Shipra laughed till her stomach ached. So did the others.

"And he thought Amit had taken the brief-case. He said you were chasing a beggar who disappeared, and then you too disappeared!"

"Poor Spywell! He should give up detecting. Who recommended him?" Shipra asked.

"A friend of my father's did. But when Dad really got fed up of Spywell's antics he rang up and told him. So he said he was really sorry, but he had heard later that the agency had changed hands."

"What a terrible mix-up," Amit said, shaking his head.

"Yes, that is why Dad said it was really lucky we got on to the case."

"But listen," Bubbles said. "There is one thing that is still bothering me. The dogs — why did they not bark?"

The others burst out laughing. It was too hilarious — Bubbles still fretting about the dogs not barking long after the mystery was solved!

"Oh, you silly!" Shipra said. "They did not bark simply because they knew Jit Singh."

"Yes," Rohan said. "He did not leave after work. Just sneaked up to the terrace and hung around till the prearranged time. When Kale and Bhallu created that disturbance outside to lure Bhim Bahadur away, he quickly jumped down onto the ledge. Earlier in the evening, he had found the opportunity to loosen the screws holding the grills. So it did not take too much time to remove them. The glass pane was quickly cut and he slipped inside. It just took him a minute to find the brief-case. Then he just walked out of the side door, ran to the back, and climbed over the wall."

"But how did he come to know about the plans?" Amit asked. "You said it was a big secret."

"He probably overheard my father and Satish

Kumar discussing it. They didn't realise he was listening. One day he went to keep something in Satish Kumar's office and he was out. Satish Kumar found him looking at the plans when he got back. When he asked Jit Singh what he was doing he said he was just looking and wondering what it was. Put on an ignorant act!"

"So he had been planning it for a long time," Shipra said.

"Yes," Rohan replied. "Later, when he did steal the plans, he realised Satish Kumar might remember and suspect him."

"So he tried to kill two birds with one stone — keep Satish Kumar out of the way and also throw suspicion on him, since he was directly involved with the plan," Amit said eagerly.

"Exactly. It seems he went to his house that morning. Kale was with him. Satish Kumar let them in, not suspecting anything. They said they wanted to talk about something private and led him into the room. There they overpowered him, gagged him and tied him up. Then Jit Singh spread the story that Satish Kumar was not there, after locking up the place."

"It was a good thing that they did not lock the outer door properly that day," Shipra said. "Or we would never have discovered Satish Kumar."

"Yes," Bubbles said. "But has that horrible Kale been caught?"

"He has been," Rohan said. "He was nabbed yesterday. He made the mistake of returning to his old haunts. The police had already been to Sunder Lal's workshop, making inquiries, and the man did not want any problems with them. He was also afraid of getting a bad name and losing customers. So as soon as he heard that Kale was around, he blew the whistle on

him. And, do you know, both Jit Singh and he have criminal records? Jit Singh produced such good references when we employed him."

"Probably forged," Bubbles said. "Do you know who should be here?" she asked, a thoughtful look on her face.

"Who?"

"Mohini."

"You are right. She should be here, too. If it hadn't been for her, who knows how things might have turned out?" Shipra said. "It was really lucky finding her there."

"Absolutely right," Amit said. "She was really brave, facing those crooks like that. Is she back with her mother?"

"Yes," Shipra said. "Kalyani came to me in tears yesterday. She knows she made a big mistake by sending her there. But Dhani Ram had offered to pay well, and she needed the money, she said."

"My Dad said she deserves a medal," Rohan said enthusiastically. "So I said the best prize for her would be an opportunity to study. Then Dad made this terrific suggestion. 'Why don't I pay for her education and other expenses while she is studying?' he said. But do you think her mother will agree?"

"I am sure she will," Shipra said. "I think it is a wonderful idea! She is quite repentant now. Actually she sent her away only because she thought Mohini was avoiding work and she resented my teaching her."

"I think she really exploited Mohini," Bubbles said. "Making her work so hard."

"In a way you can't blame her," Rohan said. "She is poor. She needs the money, I am sure."

"But she could have been kinder to Mohini," Shipra insisted.

"What I would really like to do," Amit said, "is

to meet those wonderful people again, Chottu Ram and all. They really helped us out."

"Yes, if they hadn't come to our help, the crooks would have got away," Rohan said.

"You know," Shipra said, "I wish we could repay them in some way for their help."

"I will ask Dad..." Rohan began.

"No," Bubbles said firmly. "This is something we would like to do ourselves. Let us go there, ask if there is anything they need and raise funds for it."

"Fantastic idea," Amit said enthusiastically. "I know what, let us have a raffle..."

"And sell more tickets..." Shipra laughed.

"But will anyone buy them?" Bubbles asked.

"I will buy a book," Rohan offered.

"Buy two," Amit said, "only don't knock..."

A well-aimed cushion silenced him!

Let us leave them there, shall we, planning to sell tickets again, and who knows what exciting events might be in store for them?